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SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI™

BOOK II of III

Dragon Sun

MICHAEL ELY

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POCKET BOOKS

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Years after the war that threatened the last remnants of humanity, the divided colonists of the planet Chiron become immersed in new crises as the secrets of their world begin to emerge....

Beneath the surface of the planet, a growing rebellion threatens Sheng-ji Yang's dreams of immortality, as the former executive officer of the *Unity* finds his carefully controlled world unraveling. Across the ocean, Lady Deirdre Skye's very life is in jeopardy as the Planetary Council withholds vital supplies, demanding that she turn over her research concerning the mysterious life force that is awakening on Chiron.

Though an ocean apart, Yang and Skye seek an alliance to overcome the forces arrayed against them. The stakes are high: power, survival, and the future of human life on Chiron. And in the end, only one of them will survive Yang's Dragon Sun.

**SID MEIER'S
ALPHA
CENTAURI**

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*To friends, family,
and Yuri-Ann :)*

Historian's Note

This story is set seventy years after the events of *Centauri Dawn*.

Part I

To the Shore

Chapter One

We can't know, at this time, whether the rebels won or lost the final battle in the underground tunnels of the Humlan Hive. I do know the rebels believe that they won.

My father, who was often misunderstood by those who lacked his discipline and physical hardiness, dedicated his life to the people of the Hive. He created a new world for them, one of safety and security, both physically and emotionally. He gave them a chance at a perfectly sustainable system, a culture that might last eons even on this alien world, and in return he asked only for their complete trust in his superior will and vision.

He anticipated the uprisings, and almost welcomed them—secretly, I think. As his life dragged on he craved these challenges. But he could not have anticipated Jin Long, his most formidable opponent.

It was Jin Long who led the uprisings from the far-flung bases. At first they were mere annoyances, easily countered by my father's methods of ideological warfare. But as my father's attention became split between the rebel uprisings and matters brewing in the human settlements across the sea, Jin took the opportunity to grow his power in the dark sub-basements of the Hive.

In the end, it was the smallest chinks in his armor that betrayed my father. He let his quest for immortal life distract him from the threat of fin, and he underestimated the woman, Deirdre Skye. These factors conspired against my father, and the jaws of circumstance closed around him.

But ultimately, of course, he remained victorious.

—from the journals of Yang Mia

At the edge of Chiron's largest ocean, on the opposite shore from the human settlements, a speeder lurched to a halt on a rocky beach. Two men got out and walked slowly toward the water, the taller of the two dressed in elaborate blue and silver robes. The other man was hunched over, huddled into a simple gray-green cloak. Compact filters supplied them with the oxygen-balanced air their bodies required.

They walked over a low rise and stopped at the edge of the water. Centauri A had slipped low to the horizon, and boiled the sea in orange fire. Centauri B was higher in the sky, adding a bright clarity to the air.

The taller man, Chairman Sheng-ji Yang, took a deep breath and watched the sea for a long moment. He looked about fifty years old, of Chinese descent, but with pale skin courtesy of a life lived mostly underground. His glittering black eyes swept the horizon, and he nodded to the sea.

"Fifty years ago we crossed these waters, Akim. Do you remember?"

The older man, skin creased with age, nodded and blinked at the dazzling seascape. "Of course, Chairman."

"Do you remember why?"

"Because the settlement territories were growing toward us, and we wanted to expand in peace." He continued to stare to the horizon, and reached up to brush one frail hand against skin that had grown loose on his ancient face. "We built a transport ship, and took the remainder of the crew, everyone loyal to your vision, and left that continent behind. I remember it well."

"Good." Yang kept his eyes to the horizon. "We built what we wanted to build, Akim. We surmounted every challenge, from the native life, to the hard earth that resisted our intrusions, to the challenges of our own citizens."

"Yes."

"But the settlements have continued to grow, and soon these

settlement humans, who have all but forgotten that Executive Officer Yang of the *Unity* ever existed, will cross the sea and find us. We won't be able to stop them this time."

Akim shifted uneasily, and huddled into his robes against a cool breeze that rose from the sea. "Does the Chairman think that we can work with the settlement citizens?"

Yang smiled. "We can't even work with our own citizens, Akim. The riots have gotten worse; the rebels can smell a victory. We can't afford to show them any mercy."

Akim remained silent. Yang looked down the beach, where a young woman in a red wrap walked from the parked rover and down toward the water. The wind whipped her clothes around her, but she turned her face up to the waning sun. Back at the rover another figure waited, this one in heavy armor and fingering a penetrator rifle.

"Why did you order my scientists to stop their work on the shadow army, Akim?"

Akim felt a tremble start deep in his belly, and his mouth went dry. "I only told them to slow the pace of their experiments, Chairman, for fear that the rebels would learn of them."

"You couldn't stomach it." Yang shook his head slowly. "The rebels are getting aggressive, Akim, and the settlement armies outnumber us. I need those soldiers."

Akim swallowed. "Chairman, the brutality of it. I feared for us if anyone saw..."

"No one will see," said Yang. "I've moved the experiments to the secret lab under Base Five, away from the rebels. But that's not your concern anymore." Akim felt a chill, and looked back at the rover behind them. He saw the figure that stood there, one of Yang's deadly hiveguard, a dark shadow of the setting sun.

"Chairman..."

"This is no time for mercy, Akim." Yang extended his hand, palm

up. “Hand me your seal.”

Akim hesitated, but Yang’s hand floated between them, waiting. He wouldn’t repeat the command.

Akim slowly reached into his robes and pulled out a multifaceted object made of some kind of translucent material. Inside the object a silver dragon coiled, its tiny jade eyes glinting even in the waning sunlight.

He dropped the seal into Yang’s hand. “It has been a pleasure serving you, Chairman.” He blinked, watching the sunset, focusing on the endless gray seas and not the long life he had lived.

Yang looked back toward the rover. The moment extended as a curl of white surf rushed toward their feet.

From nowhere the young woman appeared next to them, her red robe now wrapped tightly about her. She glanced at Akim, then calmly turned to Chairman Yang.

“I’m cold, Father. Are we almost ready to leave?”

The wave washed back. Yang stared at his daughter, and Akim felt an odd moment of pity for her. Why had he brought her here?

Akim reached out and touched her shoulder. “Wait in the rover, Mia. Your father will be along shortly.”

She looked at Chairman Yang, and then back at him. “Thank you, Akim,” she said, and her face opened into a dazzling smile. Then she turned and walked toward the rover.

“I remember when she was as long as my forearm, Chairman.”

Yang nodded, his face blank. Centauri A had dipped below the horizon, and shadows lengthened over the deserted beach. “Tell me this, Akim. Do you believe I should show the rebels any mercy?”

He swallowed once before answering. “None.”

Yang looked at him carefully, and then nodded. “Fine. Come back

to the rover, then, Akim. Your days as a Grand Advisor are behind you.”

Akim nodded once and lowered his head as Yang walked up toward the rover. When he looked up the world had fragmented through a prism of tears, and Akim could only think of the time he had left, and how he had no one with whom to share it.

* * *

The rover left the beach and drove for an hour, over red earth and past sporadic crimson tangles of xenofields. The low red hills of Chiron rolled on in all directions, utterly pristine under the waning light of Centauri B. It was as if this world had never been touched, and Yang watched the landscape quietly, reflecting on the emptiness.

He looked over to see Akim sitting in a rumpled heap, staring out the opposite window. Mia lay comfortably in the upper berth, her robes loosened. She stroked her long hair absently, involved with some kind of game on her small touchscreen. Every so often she parted her lips as a new strategy occurred to her, and Yang remembered years before when she had scratched games of mindwormsweeper on the tunnel walls, challenging Akim.

He turned back to the window, watching the sky darken.

* * *

Finally, the rover reached a low ring of hills, and three citizens in simple gray-green uniforms appeared and pulled red camo netting off two long metal doors. They moved quickly, jerking the doors open, and Yang took one last look at the cold vault of the sky before the rover passed into the throat of the base known as the Hive.

Inside, his hiveguard opened the rover hatch, and Yang dismounted. Two more guards stood in the large, low-ceilinged rover bay, along with a stocky man in a red and gray uniform. The man stood at a respectful distance, but Yang could feel his impatience.

“What is it, General Markos?”

The man approached, scowling. “I think we should talk about your plans, Chairman. We’re fighting a battle on two fronts, if what I read in your last decree is true.”

“Is this base secure?”

General Markos hesitated, adjusting to Yang’s unexpected question. “Of course.”

“Is the loyalty of the hiveguard at each key entry point unquestioned?”

He nodded. “In this base, yes.”

“Then we’re safe, General, and whatever battles we fight will be by our own choosing. Assemble the advisors, and we’ll discuss your concerns.”

General Markos bowed, still frowning. “Very well, Chairman.” He turned away and started barking orders into his quicklink.

Behind the rover the large doors banged shut, so that only pale white glowlamps lit the darkness. Yang turned to see Akim’s bowed form vanish into the shadows at the far side of the bay, alone. Yang walked toward the back of the bay himself, two of his loyal hiveguard shadowing him.

He was back home, in the Human Hive.

* * *

The Hive was the largest of Yang’s five bases. Like each of the other bases, it was built almost entirely underground, with a network of broad, featureless hallways radiating out from a central shaft. The central shaft pierced the heart of the base, ninety meters in diameter and more than four hundred meters deep. Light came down through skylights, touching the periphery of the shaft before being swallowed in the depths.

Chairman Yang walked down several wide tunnels until he reached the inner ring, the open area that circled the central shaft on each of several levels. Here citizens walked the broad open ways and

played games at small stone tables, or stopped to pass the time in quiet, sparse gardens. The Hive had four upper levels, clustered near the surface. Deep below, near the bottom of the shaft, were the mines, and it was a paradox of Hive life that anyone could look over a stone railing and into those awful depths, where political prisoners toiled and suffered.

Yang looked into the shaft and smiled. Citizens walked by in their simple gray-green clothes, doing their best to look industrious. A plain woman with green eyes looked away from him, and he thought of Mia. A Hive poet had once called her the jewel of the underground, but that man was now gone, locked away for spreading rebel sentiments in his poetry. That had been six years ago, when Jin Long was still a Grand Advisor and Mia had just turned eleven.

His quicklink beeped once, softly. The advisors were assembled, and he headed for the meeting room.

* * *

Inside the room his Grand Advisors awaited him, now wearing their colored robes of state. There were usually ten advisors, one from each of the five bases, along with his ministers of war, protocol, service, production, and ecology, though with Akim gone there were now nine. In the dark room, with its charcoal-gray walls, the ministers shimmered like so many dewy flowers.

“Let’s begin,” said Yang. “I regret to say that Akim won’t be joining us. His role as minister of production will remain unfilled for now.”

The advisors sat stiffly, not reacting to the news. Yang continued, “What have we learned from the settlements?”

Kint, his minister of protocol, spoke in a nervous warble. “The Gaians continue their research into the native life forms, somewhat obsessively. The spymaster reports that one of them has raised a five-kilometer boil of mindworms and used it to attack a Morganite mining drill.”

“And what does Morgan say to that?”

“He makes no secret that he believes the Gaians are responsible, but has no proof. In other matters, we are unable to duplicate the stolen Gaian technology here in the labs. It appears they have a certain looseness of character that allows some of their citizens to assume control of the native life. Though that same looseness of character has made it easy for us to conceal three operatives inside their labs.”

“Could our warriors stand up to the Gaian mindworms?”

“Difficult to say,” said the gruff voice of General Markos, now in his red robes of state. “We’ve trained, but living underground we hardly see the damn things. And if we were to send troops across the sea, well, that would limit their effectiveness somewhat”

“Are we talking about attacking the Gaians?” Kint blinked nervously. “I’ve heard no indication...”

“We’ve outfitted a force of our new soldiers in the secret labs at Base Five. We may deploy them to the other shore if it becomes necessary.”

“The *new* soldiers.” The rate of Kint’s blinking increased. “The combined settlement armies outnumber us four times. Santiago alone has four bases now, and more than twelve thousand citizens, almost half of them soldiers. And then there is the rebel activity here...”

“My point exactly,” said Markos. “Chairman, I have great respect for your tactics, but forcing our way into the settlements while dealing with the growing rebel sabotage here seems foolish, especially with this untested shadow army. And if we send our regular hiveguard overseas, we leave ourselves open to rebel attacks at home.”

Yang nodded as nine faces turned to him. “The army is untested, and we’re worried about the rebels. So the problem is not so difficult.” He looked at Kint. “We’ve already moved the shadow army to Base Three in anticipation of a rebel attack. So we’ll make it easy for them. We’ll take a dozen rebel prisoners and parade them through the base as a demonstration. The rebels will be unable to

resist the chance to free their comrades, and we'll attack them there."

"Are you sure they'll attack?" asked Markos, folding his arms across his chest.

"Jin Long, the man who leads the rebels, was once the prefect of Base Three, and we suspect he's hiding in the lower tunnels. He'll be unable to resist this chance." Yang looked at Kint again. "Jin is the key. His spirit is leading this rebellion. If we capture him, we can break these rebels."

Kint nodded weakly.

"I still don't think they'll be that foolish," said Markos in a low rumble.

"Then give them a reason to be that foolish," said Yang. "Torture the prisoners, and bruise their faces. Call our regular guard away from Base Three for drills on the surface. Make the rebels think they have a chance, and then use the new shadow army to crush them. We have no more time to waste."

He frowned at them all. Nine heads nodded, and only silence answered him.

* * *

Yang left the meeting room and walked down the hall as his advisors dispersed behind him. He walked until he came to a narrow copper-colored door, which he opened with a coded key.

Beyond the door was a wide circular room, almost completely bare except for layers of thin mats in the center and glowlamps set around the periphery. Once in the room he changed out of his robes and into a pair of cotton pants that waited, neatly folded, on a wooden bench.

He walked to the center of the room and began a series of slow, controlled stretches. As the heat increased in his body he considered the events of the day, trying to disperse any tension that would cloud his thinking.

He thought of his scientists, working at a feverish pace in the teeming laboratories to form his new shadow guard. They would solve once and for all the problem of raising a loyal army among his reclusive citizens.

He hoped.

He stared at his hands as they carved slow patterns in the air. He had done these movements ten thousand times, a hundred thousand times in his many years of life. He controlled his impulses, and controlled his body, and expected his citizens to do the same.

They don't understand. I've focused them so firmly on doing the tasks at hand, while thinking little of the future, that they no longer have the long view at all. If there will be a future for the Hive, I must guide it.

He thought of the new technologies coming out of his central labs. While his advisors worried about citizen reaction to the shadow army, he was already focused on his next breakthrough, a technology he would one day use on the advisors themselves.

The virtual world, a projection of thought transformed into a shared virtual space. His scientists had developed it a few years ago, and still thought of it as a spirit-stealing form of corrupt recreation...But he saw its potential. He saw a way to examine and control the spirits, thoughts, and secret selves of his citizens and advisors.

And when every particle of thought was laid open, when every secret desire of his citizens was unmasked, they would have no choice but to behave correctly. There would be no rebels, because every rebellion would be crushed at the genesis, at its first contemplation.

He held his hands in front of his face and stared at them, at their fine fibers of muscle and bone. A picture could capture his flesh, but this secret project, the virtual world, could capture the inner thought projections of self.

He could dream a thousand uses for such a tool.

* * *

Jin Long struck a glowlight, and its beam penetrated the darkness. Around him he could see the shadowy faces of his lieutenants, none of them over twenty-five, all wearing expressions of mixed fear and anticipation. They huddled in a small maintenance room deep below the main levels of Base Three, the narrow space suffused with an oily smell.

He was a man of medium height, with a stocky build and a strangely rounded face, like a half-cooked dumpling. Still, his penetrating eyes and rich, powerful voice gave him all the charisma he needed to lead the largest rebellion in decades.

“Chairman Yang has organized a public demonstration against the captured rebels,” said Jin. “I believe he wants to force our hand. From all indications, he wants us dead so that he can pursue his new agenda over the sea.”

“So he’s set on his plan to reenter the settlements?” asked Ani, a breathless young revolutionary with a pale face and wide, dark eyes. If it weren’t for her limitless energy, he would think that she could be dispatched with a single flick of his finger. Instead, she was now his second in command, and wore the yellow armband of a trusted officer.

“He wants something from them,” said Jin, “and we’re getting in his way. Which he means he’ll rush, and frighten his advisors, and that may play into our hands.”

“But they say he’s going to parade captured rebels down into the mines. Surely we’re going to try and free them.” That was Doc, a stern-faced young man whose dull nasal voice spoke truisms even in the darkness.

Jin shifted back into the shadows a little. “No. That’s why I’ve called you here. Most of the Base Three hiveguard have been sent to the shore for war games.”

“This is some kind of setup,” said Doc.

Jin nodded. “I believe he is going to use the shadow army against us.”

The leaders fell silent as the rebels digested the news.

“It’s about time we finally saw this mysterious army,” grumbled Doc. “I don’t believe it exists.”

“We know there are secret labs that Yang hides in the mines,” said Jin. “We know there is a night train, unregistered with the transportation inspectors, that moved between Base Five and this base last night.”

“These prisoners are friends of ours,” said Doc. “I say we take our chances.”

“Then Yang gets us all.” Jin shook his head. “Yang knows we’ll hear about this demonstration, but the demonstration isn’t for three days. So instead”—Jin took a deep breath and looked at them—“we act tonight. Right now. If Yang has moved the shadow army out of Base Five, then to Base Five we will go.”

“Into the mouth of the tiger,” said Ani.

Jin nodded. “Yang won’t suspect it. We’ll come through the lower levels, through the mines, and kill all the guards. We’ll set choke points at the upper levels, and cut off access from the other bases. We have enough people to do it.”

Doc grunted. “It might work. If we can find the equipment storage for this secret army, we’ll be in better shape than ever. And Base Five is a manufacturing facility.”

Jin nodded. “Prepare your group leaders. We’re moving tonight.”

* * *

The virtual world

Yang drifted alone in the virtual world. He had blanked the world before entering, and so floated in a void, and from this void he shaped a landscape with his thoughts. He laid down earth, with undulating hills, but underneath that brittle crust a darkness seethed and boiled. He pulled scarlet towers into the void, slender but towering, with razor-sharp tips. He brushed in the sky, and the

sky was pale white, and wan.

He felt tired from the long day, and so he dusted the earth with ancient white dust, and made rocky white bluffs that crumbled with age. He felt angry, and so he cracked the earth, and in places orange fire bubbled forth. He felt devious, and populated the world with small animals with darting eyes, and large animals with muscular limbs that ran the far hills.

He floated above this world he had built, and reflected the parts of him it revealed, parts of him he might not even recognize in himself. An enemy would give much to see this world he built, and the psyche profiles that he was generating and storing on himself during these experiments. But no enemy would see them, because the records of these sessions spooled into a secure corner of the datalinks not even his closest advisors could access.

He stared at his world, not feeling proud or humble. It was just a world, built over hours instead of eons. Its existence meant nothing independent of his own observations.

His body, which lay in a low chair in the real world, touched a switch, and the projection vanished. "It's ready," he said aloud, knowing the attending scientist could hear him. "Widen the experiments to our first test citizens. And put a console in my office. I'll want to keep using this."

* * *

From the virtual world Yang went to his command center, a long, oval room with smooth walls and various hand-carved desks and tables, including a large datalinked tactical table in the center of the room. As night deepened he sat at a small desk, reading reports on his jaunt into the virtual world from a small touchscreen. As he read a shadow of a man slipped across the doorstep and hesitated.

"I see you there," said Yang, without looking up.

There was a hesitation. "Yes, Chairman."

Yang glanced up. His spymaster was a thin, bony man, more pale

than most of the Hive citizens, if such a thing were possible. He fancied himself a ghost that could come and go as he pleased, but to Yang he was mostly a good organizer, seething with paranoia and deathly afraid of failure.

The spymaster approached the desk. "Information about the demonstration has made it to the underground, but there is no indication of when the rebels will move. They're somewhere down in Base Two or Three..."

"Never mind that now. I want to know what's happening in Zakharov's labs."

"Oh?" The spymaster's face twisted as he shifted gears to this new topic. "Well, as my last report to the Chairman says, we are still unable to get to the new genetic treatments. Zakharov is very smart, and if he decides to put something into deep cover, there it will go. He has effectively locked his top longevity scientists into a secure lab of their own."

"Why did he do this?"

The spymaster began rocking back and forth on his feet. "We aren't sure. It's possible he got wind of our spying, and since we *have* stolen technologies from those very labs..."

"Stop," said Yang. He studied the spymaster. "Lacking those genetic technologies, my plans for the future of the Hive are threatened. Do you understand that?" He stared at the surface of his desk. "I want you to plant a Gaian flower in Zakharov's territory."

A Gaian flower was a small transmitter traceable to the Gaian networks. The spymaster's face pinched into a troubled frown. "What could that accomplish, Chairman?"

Yang gestured to the touchscreen. "According to your own reports, Director Morgan has been working on a technology that will help him to fight the mindworms, but he has been unsuccessful so far."

"That's true."

"So we make sure that Zakharov doesn't like Deirdre, either, and

Zakharov will give or sell his anti-mindworm technology to Director Morgan.

“But if Zakharov and Morgan cooperate against Deirdre, how does that help us, when none of them even knows we’re here?”

“We benefit because Deirdre will need an ally, although she doesn’t know it yet.” Yang looked back to the touchscreens. “Instruct your spies to plant the flower. And I want to set a watcher on the Gaian territories. Offshore, hidden but waiting, something that will intrigue the Gaians when we reveal ourselves to them.”

“Certainly, Chairman.” The spymaster slipped away.

* * *

An hour later, Chairman Yang finally went to his sleeping chambers for the night. He had ninety-nine chambers, scattered throughout his five bases, and he would choose which one to sleep in each night at random. Only Mia and one of his attendants would know which one he had chosen.

Tonight he chose his red room, a simple room furnished with high-quality hybrid mahogany furniture and deep red tapestries on the wall. He took off his clothes and washed from a metal basin, then lay in his bed. A spoken command dimmed the lights.

Patterns of synthesized moonlight appeared on the ceiling, cast from hidden projectors. He stared at the patterns, calming his mind. Images rose up, including the face of Sandra, Mia’s mother, who had shared this bed so long ago. It was always her face that sometimes came to him on the edge of sleep.

A series of tones echoed softly through the room. He recognized their pattern and commanded the door to open. Someone entered the room and crossed to a large, soft chair about four meters away from the bed. He recognized the soft footsteps and breathing of his only daughter.

Fabric rustled as she slid into her familiar position in the big chair. He waited, watching the patterns of moonlight. His daughter would

often sit with him late at night, sometimes not talking at all until he sent her away, but tonight she hardly waited.

“Are you going to kill the old man, Father?”

He let a long exhalation slip through his nostrils. “Not yet.”

“Why do you want to kill him at all? He’s been so loyal.”

“He has been loyal. But people grow soft in old age, and come to regret the things they have done in the past. Akim was once as merciless and cunning as anyone in the Hive, which is why we became friends.” He took a deep breath. “When you get to my position, Mia, you may be allowed only one mistake. It isn’t fitting to be swayed by emotion.”

“Of course not, Father.”

He shifted, trying to stare through the darkness at her. She sat with her legs over the large chair, a slender form in the darkness, the pale white of her sleeping gown barely visible. “He’s well trained. He could read you like a book. Bury your suspicions, erase them completely from your mind like I taught you.”

“OK.” He heard her let out a long, soft breath. “Is that rebel, Jin Long, now the most cunning man in the Hive?”

“What have you heard about him?”

“I know what people talk about, Father. They’re afraid to stop me from going anywhere, so I hear things.”

“Forget about him, Mia. And be careful where you go. Does a hiveguard stay with you at all times?”

“Mostly. Not when I bathe.” She was teasing him, and he shook his head.

“Go to your room, Mia. It’s time for bed.”

“Yes, Father.”

He heard her get up and pad across the room. Before she left he heard her voice float from the darkness.

“Will I lead the Hive someday, Father?”

He remained silent, closing his eyes. She was his daughter, but he hadn’t chosen her. A part of her was Sandra, and that would always make her less.

The silence deepened, and finally he heard the door open and click shut again. He blanked his mind and commanded himself to sleep.

In one minute, he slept.

* * *

Jin Long signaled Doc, and Doc signaled the advance force of rebels, men and women who had mixed levels of training, and an odd variety of weapons, but shared expressions as hard as stone.

They streamed into the tunnel station at Base Three, in the deep of night, and the sterile metal platform rattled with gunfire as they dispatched the one guard and one transportation inspector. No trains waited on the platform, so two of the dark-clothed figures jumped down onto the tracks and jogged back into the tunnel, where an out-of-service car waited. A third figure ran to the other end of the tunnel and fiddled with something on the floor, disabling the trigger device that would alert the transportation ministry that an unauthorized train was leaving the station.

Jin, Ani, and Doc waited on the platform. Behind them gathered more rebel fighters in twos and threes, most young, their faces set. Some of them stared at the dead bodies on the platform.

“Get rid of those, Doc,” he said. “There’s a recycling chute down that hallway.”

Doc motioned to two others, and they moved with him, dragging the bodies across the clean metal floor. A low whine started, and a train inched forward. Jin could see the impassive faces of his soldiers through the glass of the front window.

“Get aboard,” he said, his voice tense. Doors swung open, and rebels boarded, all in their simple uniforms with colored armbands, holding their mismatched array of weapons.

Doc returned and followed Jin onto the train, heading for the front car as the doors closed. Ani waited for them, coordinating troop movements on her quicklink. “We’ve taken a train at the Great Collective as well, and the others have assembled at Base Five to meet us. Odds are good we won’t be discovered for the next two hours at least.”

“Let’s go then,” said Jin. “If we’re caught in the trains, we’re as good as dead. Does everyone in your groups know their roles?”

Ani and Doc nodded. Jin set his jaw and continued, “Regular citizens are to be detained in the refreshment halls for now. Everyone else we kill, quickly and cleanly.” He pulled out his own weapon, a sawed-off penetrator. “We’re outnumbered. This isn’t the time for mercy.”

“Right,” said Doc. His face looked soft and worried in the darkness. The train built up speed, until it rushed down its sleek metal tube toward its sleeping destination.

Chapter Two

In the Gaian territories across the sea, Lady Deirdre awakened from a long nightmare to find herself in her bed, her silk sheets damp with sweat. She stared for a moment at the high ceiling arching overhead, trying to calm her racing heart, feeling the dull throb of a hangover. The bank of tall windows on the other side of the room was set on maximum tint, allowing none of the light of Chiron's suns into her rooms.

She reached up a hand and massaged her temples, then turned over. Next to her slept a man, young and blond and with limbs as slender as a woman's. His mouth hung open in his sleep, she couldn't remember his name, and he couldn't be more than twenty-four years old.

I'm 140 years his senior.

Of course it wasn't quite that bad. Counting the forty-year cryosleep on the journey from Earth, and the genetic treatments from Zakharov's labs that kept her young, she was *technically* 160 years old or so. But really, physically, she was much younger.

And mentally? Emotionally? I'm old enough to know better.

She slipped quietly out of bed and walked across her vast new chambers to the tall windows. Images of the Bacchanalian festivities the night before teased at her consciousness, but she quickly pushed them away. She hoped the young man wouldn't awaken until she was gone.

No such luck. She heard a stirring in the bed behind her, and glanced over her shoulder to see him rubbing his face. After a moment he looked at her with a cocky, lopsided grin.

"Good morning," she said, wanting to preempt any coy remarks.

“Oh, indeed.” He let out a self-satisfied sigh. He got out of bed, naked as she was, and walked across the room toward her. She quickly crossed to a closet and wrapped herself in a pale yellow robe.

When she turned back to him he had stopped, frowning. She gave him a tight smile. “You’ll have to take your breakfast in the common rooms. I’m sorry.”

His frown remained for a moment, until he finally nodded. “Done with me, then? All right.” He looked around her chambers, with their high arched ceilings and immaculate fixtures. “So this is living in true harmony with the world.”

She reached out and punched a touchswitch on the wall, turning off the tint on the windows and allowing the blazing light of Centauri A and B to flood the room. The young man made a choked sound and put his hand over his face. “Please leave now,” she said.

He turned away from the windows, his hand still over his face, and then began picking up his clothes from their scattered piles around the floor. He headed for the door, still naked, and she saw with dismay that he was going to walk out past her guard that way. Before he left he turned back to her.

“You weren’t so cold last night, Lady. I hope you can still remember that.” He shot her one last arrogant grin and walked out the door. She shook her head.

He’ll be a glass cutter for life, that’s for sure.

But his words stung. The visions of the night before encroached on her. It was as if some kind of desperate madness had overtaken her. She could feel the frantic sweat on her skin again, as she reached inside herself for a passion she once had felt, and instead only found more frantic thrashing. She touched her forehead again, and her hand trembled.

What’s wrong with me?

She walked to a full-length mirror and slipped out of the robe again.

Her body was still firm, with small but shapely breasts and strong legs, and she felt a moment of wistful vanity. But she knew the signs of age encroaching yet again, in the wrinkles that touched the periphery of her oval face and the pains she felt in her joints. Each time she had to return to the genetic treatments sooner and sooner, and each time she wondered how many more years she could steal from the grave. And each time the life force, the energy that made her *feel* alive, seemed farther away.

Until last night, in the throes of passion, she had felt something dark and cold squeeze her heart. She looked out the window at Chiron, at its rolling red hills and the crimson tangle of xenofields that touched the periphery of her High Garden base. And she knew she would never see the end of this world's story.

* * *

"Well, it wasn't a heart attack," said her personal physician, Bayliss, as he loosened the medical probe from around her arm. "Not quite, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

He leaned forward and shined a light into her eyes, then she felt his hands pushing into the skin around her throat. "It means that no one else has a body quite like you do, Lady. Your heart has thumped out more than its fair share of beats, and it's just..." He shrugged helplessly. "You're 165 years old. I don't think the genetic treatments are working very well anymore."

"So what do we do about it?"

"You need another treatment, much sooner than I expected. I don't see any other way."

She felt her heart sink. "I thought as much."

"It's been almost eight years. I'm sorry." He made a note on his portable touchpanel. "We'll have to contact Zakharov for more."

She looked at him, startled. "Don't we have any treatments in storage?"

“No. Zakharov recalled the outstanding treatments about six months ago. He said he has some improvements he wants to make to the technology. All we have left is a half treatment for your advisor, Goldman, who’s due pretty soon. Weren’t you notified?”

“No.” She felt her heart start to race, and she cursed the loose and disorganized Gaian bureaucracy.

“Well, like I said, we didn’t expect you to need them this soon.” He came and sat down next to her, on the examination table, and he reached out to touch her hand. “Lady, I also need to tell you. At some point I think these treatments will stop working. You should think about that, and prepare yourself accordingly. Don’t be fooled by what you see in the mirror.”

She nodded and climbed off the examination table. “OK, then. Contact Zakharov and get the treatments. There’s a critical vote at the Planetary Council meeting in three weeks, and I won’t take the treatments until after that meeting, anyway.”

He nodded and snapped his touchpanel closed. “Fine, but I want you to come in every week until then, so we can monitor things.” He walked to the door and looked back at her. He looked as if he would say something more, but then he turned and left.

The door closed behind him, and Deirdre started to slip out of her white patient’s gown. As she did her hand brushed by her hair, and she paused to feel it. It was still thick and dark, but felt much more brittle than the softness she remembered after her last series of treatments.

She had a sudden vision of Zakharov, the settlement’s master scientist, and his calculating blue eyes set in a craggy but ageless face. It dawned on her that he now held the key to her longevity, and yet she couldn’t remember the last time she had really spoken to him.

* * *

She left the medlabs and walked the clean hallways of the base to clear her head. Gaia’s High Garden, the largest of her five bases,

had started as a collection of bubble tents huddled around a series of mammoth eighty-meter-tall rock formations. The location was perfect, with rolling red hills in every direction and a vast tangled field of the crimson xenofungus nearby.

In the early days after planetfall, that field had served as her laboratory. While the other settlement leaders had feared the xenofungus and the mindworms, Deirdre had encouraged her people to embrace these native life forms and study them. While the other human bases fought off deadly mindworm attacks, Deirdre had been the first to discover that the mindworms could be controlled and directed, giving her a massive head start in xenobiology research which the other leaders now envied.

Later, when expansion had been necessary, the Gaians had built their facilities into the sides of the rock formations, which actually weren't rock at all but some kind of hardened, long-dead xenofungal mass. The care she used during this expansion had served them well; her base was beautiful, with glass and synthmetal tiers clinging to the high towers and pristine red hills all around them.

The medlabs were on the second-highest tier of the central tower, and she found herself approaching one of the huge observation windows. She stared out over the pristine land, and then a poster on the window caught her eye. Printed on a thin sheet of translucent material, the poster said, "A mindworm is a terrible thing to waste." An accompanying image showed young, fresh-faced Gaian men and women playing near the xenofields.

She smiled. Had she ever been that naive? Now the young people went into the xenofields at night to experience the psychotropic effects of the xenofungus itself, using it like a drug. *Well, let them. It will take their minds off the need for luxuries, and bigger quarters and stylish clothes.* She didn't want them to crave those things, and as time rolled on she realized she was the only living Gaian who remembered the devastation of Earth.

Ironically, that devastation was what she wanted most to forget.

Her quicklink beeped. It was Goldman, her top advisor.

She walked to a nearby dining area and sat at a small, sunlit table to wait for Goldman. He bustled up a few minutes later, his face looking haggard but still strong, his hair long and silver-white. Right behind him came Simper, her other top advisor, taller and much thinner than Goldman and wearing a stylish wrap that made him look somewhat foppish.

Goldman smiled. "Lady Skye, hello." She nodded and took Goldman's hand, touching the tanned, creased flesh. His hand felt warm to the touch.

"Greetings, Lady Skye," said Simper, pressing in close to her. "I hear that you've been to your physician. Are you well?"

"Of course." Where did this man get his information? "If not, I'm sure I would have told you already." Simper bobbed his head, and she took the slender hand he extended to her and gave it a quick squeeze. Simper Pol was a forced experiment in democracy, elected to her council of advisors under pressure from a vocal minority of her citizens, who wanted to make sure her desire for harmony with nature didn't mean sleeping in the dirt and eating mindworm omelets for breakfast.

"Thanks for meeting me here," she said to them.

"We know you'd rather meet away from the command center," said Goldman. "I find it stifling as well."

"Stifling," agreed Simper. "Are we prepared for the meeting of the Planetary Council?"

"Almost," said Deirdre. "I want the surveyors to recheck those territory borders."

"Already done," said Goldman. "They've verified again that the forested hills to the east are not officially recognized as part of Gaian territory. We've asked for a one-hundred-kilometer extension of our territories, which encompasses the forests plus a little more, just in case."

"I think we'll need that extra to bargain with," said Simper.

"Morgan is not going to let us have that land without something in return. Why should he?"

"And why shouldn't he?" asked Goldman. "We seeded those hills and grew the forests. Lady Skye created the hybrids that flourished better than we could have hoped."

Simper dismissed the argument with a flip of his hand. "Morgan doesn't care about the trees. He wants the minerals underneath, and there are no better deposits available to him for hundreds of kilometers."

"We were there first," said Deirdre.

"He'll want something," said Simper stubbornly. "He's a businessman. We should have something ready to put on the table. We could open trade with him, or allow him to pipe more of his MorganLink video channels here. These are simple requests..."

Goldman shook his head. "Simple with someone like you as trade liaison, right?"

Simper touched a clasp on the throat of his wrap. "We need to acknowledge what our citizens want. They want what Morgan has. They want his luxuries."

"Some of them do," said Deirdre. "But they'll have to wait. Director Morgan has already turned his own territory into a field of boreholes, and uses more metal in one of his bases than we use in six. We'll let the Council decide this one." She looked at Simper, whose eyes darted back and forth between her and Goldman. Was this the future of Chiron? She suddenly felt nauseated.

"We'll meet again before the Council. You can raise any further concerns in your weekly reports."

"Very well," said Goldman, nodding. Simper got up from the table, shaking his head.

One advantage of having a loyal advisor who had held your trust for a long time was that you could carry on an internal dialogue with him even when he wasn't there. As Deirdre left the meeting, she dialogued with Goldman in her head, filling in what he would say.

I don't like Simper, said the internal Goldman. But he has a point. He knows the Morganite mind better than anyone.

That's why we don't like him, she answered herself.

Yes! But we should be prepared. Our lifestyle has left us weak. Morgan is far ahead in technology, in weapons, and even in Council influence.

But my forests! They are stunning...Earth forests on Chiron, a complete ecosystem, grown from nothing!

Yes. But they're only trees, at least to the others. We must be prepared. I just don't want that little wimp to have the satisfaction of knowing he scared me.

He scared me, too. But we've been scared before.

The xenofields had scared them, and Deirdre had shown her citizens how beautiful they truly were. The mindworms had scared them, and now she had citizens directing the mindworms as if they were Beethoven conducting a symphony. And now Morgan scared her.

But Morgan was human. And humans scared her more than anything.

Later that day

Deirdre touched her hair and considered the research report in front of her. It was part of an ongoing test series that had caught her eye, and for some reason, with the talk of new threats from Morgan, this report seemed more important than ever.

It was dry and technical, as these reports tended to be, but it detailed the progress of one of her pet projects, an experiment to

allow humans to “read” the energy fluctuations swirling through Chiron’s native life forms. It used a device that had been labeled the empath chair.

A jotted note from her head researcher, Sylvie, had caught her eye. The research had progressed to the testing stages, but then had stalled.

She thought about the busy, cramped command center, and Goldman and Simper tossing their barbs at each other. Then she thought of the biolabs, where an introverted soul could feel at peace among the Gaian “seeds and beakers.”

She linked to Sylvie and requested a meeting in the labs. It had been a long time.

* * *

At the base of the High Garden’s central tower was a carefully preserved piece of Chiron’s ecosystem surrounded by unobtrusive laboratory modules. In this area Deirdre’s handpicked scientists were free to experiment at will, seeking to unlock ever deeper mysteries of Chiron.

Deirdre entered these biolabs from a secure elevator, and reflected how she barely recognized the labs since the last expansion. There were new white walls, and doors that hissed open instead of using a simple handle, and lean, nervous guards at regular intervals. She tried to remember what kept her away from research, her first love, but the last months and years seemed a blur of politics and policies.

At least she recognized the thin young woman with the homely face coming down the hall toward her.

“Hello, Sylvie,” Deirdre said.

The woman returned a nervous smile. “Are you ready to see our progress, Lady Skye?”

“Of course.” Sylvie led her down a curving glass hallway. Through the glass Deirdre could see the “laboratory gardens,” a broad patch of red earth mingled with tongues of xenofungus extending from

the nearby fields. Groups of scientists in pressure masks stood in small clusters, conferring over experiments.

In the center of the field stood a tall woman with long black hair, facing away from Deirdre. She wore a flowing robe and lifted her hands to the sky with the grace of a dancer.

“Who’s that?”

“Lady Skye, that’s Lindly Downs. She’s our best brood trainer.”

“Of course. I didn’t recognize her from this distance.”

Deirdre stopped to watch the woman work. Lindly turned toward a tongue of xenofungus, and now Deirdre could see her in profile, a study of beauty and youth, her eyes lost in the deep focus of calling the mindworms.

“How old is she again?”

“She’s twenty-two. A prodigy.” Deirdre could hear the tinge of awe in Sylvie’s voice. “No one has been able to control the mindworms like she can.”

Deirdre didn’t answer. As she watched, Lindly lifted both of her hands in one smooth motion, and suddenly, in the tongue of xenofungus, a hundred thousand writhing creatines appeared, tiny wormlike shapes. A hissing rattle rose in Deirdre’s mind, pressing in on her consciousness.

“The worms should behave under Lindly’s influence,” she heard Sylvie’s voice say, but it seemed muffled, as if coming from a distance. “You may sense their psych attacks, but it shouldn’t really affect us. If it gets to be too much, signal me, and we’ll leave.”

“I ran the original experiments on worm control,” said Deirdre. “I won’t need any help.”

In the field, Lindly moved her hands to the side, and the worms spread out, rolling from the xenofungus and onto the red earth to her sides. Then she stepped back and kneeled, folding her body into a tight knot, and the worms also contracted into a tiny pool that

quivered with motion. Deirdre heard the sounds shrink to a concentrated hiss in her mind, and she felt her knees start to tremble. She looked at Sylvie, but Sylvie just stood in rapture, staring at Lindly and the mindworms.

Embrace them.

Deirdre shook her head. The worms gnawed at her consciousness, seeking to tear her brain apart from the inside, but her intuition had just told her to *let them in*.

She saw Lindly stand up, and the worms suddenly flowed toward her and then up into a column, a living pillar nearly forty meters high. Lindly stretched her body up, powerful and taut, and at that moment Deirdre closed her eyes and reached out to the worms, embracing their jarring cries. She felt a stab of pain for a moment, and then suddenly she felt her spirit lift, as the worm voices merged into a hum that expanded to fill her mind, calm and immense.

Lindly spread her arms apart, directing the worms to divide and pool again, but Deirdre felt the voice of the worms at that moment, and knew they wanted to reach still higher, toward the bright sky.

Do it, she thought, and smiled as the hum rose in pitch.

For one brief moment she saw Lindly's body twist into an attitude of concern, as the worm pillar soared into a slender column that arced into the bright sky, a hundred meters or more. Deirdre saw them soar and felt her own spirit lift for a moment, as Lindly stood helpless, and then suddenly the wormsong crashed into static, and the tall pillar collapsed to the ground, becoming Lindly's toy again.

Deirdre gasped and reached out to touch the glass, her mind spinning. Sylvie made a sound of choked awe.

"That's the highest I've ever seen them go, Lady Skye!"

Deirdre felt the cool glass under her hands, trying to collect herself. Lindly did a few more maneuvers, but seemed shaken. The sound of that mindworm song still tugged at Deirdre, and she grabbed Sylvie's sleeve.

"I want to use this new technology you reported that lets the human mind read the native life," she said.

Sylvie looked at her. "You, Lady Skye? It's unproven technology, and we've gotten no positive responses..."

"It doesn't matter," said Deirdre. She shook her head and swallowed. "I'm returning to my quarters now, to rest. But get ready, because tomorrow I want to use this empath chair for myself."

* * *

Simper sat hunched at his touchpanel in the Gaian command center, contacting his web of allies, informants, and spies until his eyes and shoulders ached. Behind him the work of the command center went on, with tense Gaians hurrying from console to console in the cramped room, buried deep in the base of the central tower. Cramped space and lots of people—it explained why Lady Skye was never there.

A few plants sat around the room in pots, sad specimens that took their nourishment from the bank of artificial lighting overhead. Only in Gaia would a potted plant be allowed near delicate equipment. He smiled at that and went back into the links.

"Here, Councilman." A woman named Jean Fox, according to her ID tag, set a mug of hot tea next to him and touched his shoulder. "You've been at work all day. Both suns will be down within the hour, so hurry if you want to catch a double down." A double sundown, both suns slipping below the horizon at the same time, a rare and much treasured sight for any self-respecting Gaian.

"Thanks," he said quickly, and made a vague motion at her with his fingers. If she was flirting with him, now was not the time. Although...

He turned to her. "Do you really believe sunsets and potted plants are enough to support a fulfilling life on this world?"

She stared at him, then shrugged. "They're nice things, I suppose,

and Lady Skye says...”

“But Lady Skye enjoys double sundowns from her rooms on the tower tops. In Director Morgan’s territory, demand for lush quarters is met by supply.” *And a little less fungus hugging is all I’m asking for*, as a popular Morganite sentiment went.

A message flagged with a Priority One symbol appeared on his screen, and he reluctantly turned away. “You’ll have to excuse me.”

“OK.” She turned and walked away. She was pretty, but didn’t have the nice fragrance and elegant clothes of some of the Morganite women who had greeted him on his outreach tours. Gaians had a kind of “less is more” philosophy for attracting each other—less clothing, less inhibition was more their speed.

He read the message, and then read it again. “I’ll be damned,” he finally said, and looked around the command center. Goldman wasn’t there, and Deirdre wasn’t there. He tapped the edge of the touchpanel, considering.

Something big was happening in the Morgan labs, and Deirdre should know. After a moment more of deliberation, he got on his quicklink and contacted her.

* * *

Lady Deirdre watched Simper’s face on the small window of her quicklink. “How confident are you about this information?” she asked.

“I trust the source, Lady Deirdre. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Director Morgan even wanted us to know about it, considering our current negotiations.”

“Perhaps he’s trying to trick us.”

Simper shrugged noncommittally. “We’ll find out if we ever try to use more mindworms against him. You’ll remember that I advised you against relying on the native life as our primary means of defense. You know, eggs in one basket...”

“Thank you.” Deirdre shut off the link, already lost in thought. She stroked her hair as she considered this new information.

Trance rovers. A new Morgan technology. She knew that Director Morgan was working on anti-mindworm technologies, but she thought all his experimentation had failed. Was this some kind of breakthrough? And if so, would it threaten her brood trainers, and the mindworms they summoned?

She started thinking of Simper hunched in the command center, and stern-faced Morgan scientists plotting against her, and craggy Zakharov fiddling with his gene treatments.

She shook off the negative thoughts. *It's been a long day. I'll read the reports in the morning.*

She poured a glass of fungal wine and stepped to her windows. The wine tasted bitter, but with each sip feelings of lethargy and lazy pleasure washed through her. She felt the buzz of a semitrance descend over her, disconnecting her from her body, just as she wanted. The lighting in her chambers was beautiful, soft and subdued, and outside she could watch the expanse of Chiron slip into twilight as Centauri A and B touched the horizon together.

Double down.

She looked east, where in the distance she knew her thriving forests covered the hillsides. She looked south, where the rolling crimson xenofields seemed to pulse in the twilight. And as she watched the xenofields, she could see points of light drifting to them and away from them, as Gaian patrols and curiosity seekers visited Planet's deepest mystery.

Planet. It seemed a fitting term, more organic and personal than the U.N.-assigned Chiron. She would call this world Planet.

She thought of the young man she had woken up with today, and his cocksure attitude. She was sure that *he* would have no problem accepting Director Morgan's new gaming channels in exchange for longer and harder hours on the cutting crew.

Another sip of the xenowine dispersed any thoughts of him.

She sat on her windowsill and watched nature's grand display, thinking of that moment today when she had touched the essence of the mindworms, and she looked again to the xenofields.

Things were changing. She could see it in Simper's darting eyes, and in the arrogant faces of some of the fourth-generation Planet-born, and in Morgan's newfound daring. The world was changing, and people were forgetting the things about Earth she wanted them to remember. So if her body did give out, tomorrow or next week, would that be so bad?

A sudden sadness washed over her as she drank and watched the fields alone. She had lived more years than anyone, had risen to the top of her field, had survived the destruction of Earth and the fragmenting of the *Unity* mission, but the more she accomplished the farther she seemed from happiness. Her success, her maturity, had cost her...what?

She looked over the xenofields again, thinking of that brief touch of the mindworms today, as if they had called her. She tried to remember the last time she had visited those fields, the last time she had felt the dirt in her gardens.

She set down her glass. It seemed a long time ago.

* * *

While Deirdre drifted to sleep under the half-light of that Centauri night, sleek metal machines pushed their way into the edges of another vast xenofield, in the no-man's-land to the east of Gaian territory.

One machine extended a thick plastic barrel, and from metal tanks on its back great clouds of yellow fog rolled out. The great machine turned right and left on synthmetal treads, and the crimson tubules of the xenofields withered and burned, meters deep.

The machine crunched its way deeper into the fields, the helmeted, faceless pilot inside trying for maximum damage. And in time the

fields to their right rippled, and then the high-pitched whine began in the mind of the pilot, and then the worms boiled from the xenofields toward the intruder.

“They’re here!” choked the pilot into his link, sweat pouring down his face under his helmet, his arms and legs straining at the straps in his chair. He had been bound in for his own protection, but the veins in his neck stood out alarmingly.

From behind the fungtank came a rover, small and speedy and covered with shiny armor plating. On the top of the rover a strange bluish metal disc rotated lazily as if touched by a wind, but there was no wind in these fields. As the rover approached the mindworms, the disc swiveled in to orient on them.

“I think I’m...under...” The speech of the flametank’s driver became gasps, and the gasps became less regular and more frantic.

From the top hatch of the rover three soldiers came in sleek gray and yellow uniforms with bands of blue metal around their heads. They moved slowly but calmly, and as the worms approached these three warriors pulled out spitters, weapons that shot a fine spray of corrosive acid onto the worms.

Even before the warriors reached it tire mindworm boil seemed to lose its coherence. Worms that bunched like great fists, ready to rise into the sky and crush the human intruders, collapsed back into pools of liquefying wormbodies.

The warriors moved as if someone else directed their steps, and the worms had no fear to feed on. Once the flametank driver howled in terror, and at that moment several hundred worms snapped to life and bored into the foot and shin of one of the warriors, who fell to the ground without making a sound and thrashed there. But the other two warriors continued, trancelike, turning the worms into pools of smoking liquid. And the worms slowly dispersed back into the xenofungus as Planet tried to close its newest wound.

Chapter Three

Base Five, officially named Fellowship City, was a small underground base, built by Chairman Yang to the north of the Hive as a production facility. As the newest base it was smaller than the other four, but its status as a production facility meant that halls were unusually wide and sparse. There was little art; most things had a purpose, even more so than in the other four Hive bases.

At the end of one hallway Jin Long took his robes of state, balled them into an armful of shimmering silk, and threw the ball into an incinerator tube. There was a flash of heat from the tube, and he waited a moment, then smiled broadly.

“This base now belongs to us.”

The five young people gathered around him clapped and cheered. He let them have their youthful outburst and then lifted his hands to quiet them. “All right,” he said. “What news?”

The six of them stood in a small, dark cubbyhole at the end of one of the lower tunnels in Base Five. On the upper levels of the base his rebel troops paraded joyously around the central shaft, leading broken cheers and throwing “burning comets” down into the shaft, which turned fifty brilliant colors on their journey to the depths. But here Jin sought to refocus his youthful lieutenants on the task at hand.

“There are no more of the hiveguard on the three upper levels,” said Ani, flushed with victory and excitement “We killed about fifty of them, and they killed or wounded about twenty of us. We’re searching the lower levels now.”

Jin nodded. “Do a quick sweep first, but then I want Doc to oversee a detailed search of the mines. There could be prisoners down there, or a passage from another of the bases, or anything.” From somewhere nearby came the whistling of another firework and a

distant cheer.

“We need to get those people to work,” muttered Doc. “Yang could be assembling a counterstrike right now.”

Jin nodded soberly. “By coming to this base instead of staying in Base Three, we’ve avoided the bulk of the Chairman’s army. But that army is still out there. Are all the regular citizens detained?”

Doc nodded. “They’re all barricaded in the large refreshment halls. They’re quiet but nervous, waiting to see what will happen next”

“See if any will join us,” said Jin. “Interview them one by one.” He started walking down the hall toward the central shaft, his thoughts drifting to the mines deep below them, where the shattered souls of the Human Hive toiled in the depths.

As they approached the shaft a red comet sailed down, tire head blooming into the angry red face of a dragon. Another cheer reverberated from above.

“Go get those people and put them on guard post,” Jin snapped to Doc. “Remind them the Chairman wants us all dead.”

* * *

Chairman Yang circled the expressionless man, his bare feet gripping the mats beneath him. As he moved the man turned to follow him, but Yang could read no emotion on the blank face. It added an extra dimension to the fight.

Yang could feel the sweat on his skin. His muscles tensed with fury at the events of the night before, with Jin slipping unexpectedly into Base Five and killing his loyal guards. The rage would pass, he knew, but for now he chose to stew in it.

He danced in and jabbed at his opponent, using a standard boxing stance. The man moved quickly to block, and Yang shifted toward him and grabbed his forearm, then performed a joint lock and threw him to the floor, hard.

The man lay still for half a second and then lurched to his feet. He

came at Yang again, the same dull look on his face.

Yang moved in, still feeling the rage twist at him. He danced in and then back, letting his hands touch his opponent's arm. As soon as he felt the slightest shift in his opponent's weight he advanced quickly, issuing force through his legs and up into his arms and hands. The man windmilled back and fell to the ground with a crack.

"Get up," said Yang.

The man rose slowly and moved in again. He punched at Yang twice, heavy, wild swings, but Yang let one land on his chest to feel its force. He stumbled back a little. The blow was hard but had no finesse.

He coughed. His opponent smiled, and the image of Jin suddenly filled Yang's mind.

Yang went in low and fast. His hands sank like metal spades into his opponent's chest and ribs. The man stumbled back, and Yang followed him like a shadow, emitting short, hissing breaths as he rained blow after blow down on the man's chest and face. Thin trails of blood arced through the air.

Finally the man stumbled, and Yang gave him a last blow to the throat. He fell, head lolling back, and then he rolled over.

On the back of his head a massive scar formed ridges of damaged flesh, crusted with dried blood.

* * *

Fatigue

Yang left the man on the floor and walked down a long hall to the small room where his link into the virtual world waited. He could feel his anger retreating, and weariness washing over his body. His stamina was not what it used to be, and the ebbing of his purifying rage left him with a deep fatigue.

He sat in a small, straight-backed chair and put on the elaborate pair of goggles that connected him to the virtual world. He hit the

activate switch, his heart still pounding, and sank back into the chair.

Once again he found himself floating in a gray void. Once again he began building a world, this time focusing deeply on the weariness nesting in his bones.

The world he built was covered by a dark gray haze. A pale white wash of light came from nowhere, and the surface of the world seemed to stretch and undulate, slowly. The structures he built were dark and low to the ground, and the animals hid in dark places and slept. Spindles of gray webbing crisscrossed the ground, and the whole world seemed to breathe, the elastic ground ebbing and flowing in a slow rhythm. It was a silent, dark world.

Every aspect of the world he built spooled into his personal records, until his weariness slowly passed and the world brightened.

And when he finally emerged, he filed the spools under *fatigue*. The rebels now seemed a small concern, and his gaze was focused once more on the future.

He headed for the showers, and signaled General Markos to meet him afterward.

* * *

Jin Long sat in a small room that once belonged to a production inspector. In the next room over the great looms that had once churned out citizens' clothing were now silent, sabotaged by zealous rebels.

"We shouldn't have destroyed the looms," said Jin, looking up at Ani. The office was small and cluttered, and Ani sat in a narrow metal chair between two shelves stacked with piles of fabric.

"I know that, sir. We scolded the soldiers responsible."

"How will we make our own clothing now? We'll be wearing our Hive clothes for the rest..." He shook his head. "Forget it." On a wall-mounted digital frame behind him the face of Chairman Yang appeared. His lips moved, but no words came out, because Jin had

torn the speaker out of the frame; it now dangled from narrow filaments.

Ani blinked at the image of Yang hovering over Jin's shoulder. Jin looked at the image and shook his head. "Spouting his antirebel poison into this base, I'm sure. Those things will probably keep playing long after he's dead."

Ani swallowed. "When will Yang attack, sir?"

"I don't know." Jin looked over the maps again.

Doc had already found three unmarked hallways in the mines, which meant there could be more. He had no idea how many passages Yang had left off the common maps, and it worried him. "I don't know why he hasn't come bursting through the skylights already."

His quicklink beeped, a priority message from Doc. He opened the link. "Yes, Doc?"

On the video feed he looked at Jin from a dirty face. "I've found something down here, sir. A very strange doorway. It's narrow and has no key and no latch, and it looks new."

He looked at Ani, whose foot twitched nervously. "I'll come for a look," Jin said. "I want to see some of these new passageways anyway." He broke the link and looked at Ani, who stared back at him. "I hate the mines," said Jin.

Ani nodded. "Who doesn't?"

* * *

Mia held a white stone between her fingers and considered the game board, with its grid of nineteen by nineteen intersecting lines. Akim waited for her move, studying the interlocking patterns of black and white formed by their play.

They sat at a small gaming table, near one of the quiet gardens around the central shaft. As Mia reached out to place her stone, Akim watched her long fingers, slender and sure. She had grown

quickly, he realized, and her play had gotten more mature as well. Every piece seemed placed for a reason.

“Your play has improved, Mia.” He picked up a black stone and set it down on the board with a click “Has your father been teaching you?”

She shook her head absently. Her hair had been pulled back, enhancing the clean lines of her face.

“He has no time to teach me games. I only want him to teach me things about the world.”

He nodded. “Your father certainly knows about that. But games have their place.”

“I hope to be a general someday.” She said it absently, but then her eyes flickered to him to get his response. He smiled in reassurance.

“An admirable goal. General Markos won’t last forever, I suppose.”

“For losing Base Five to the rebels, he may not last another week.” She placed her stone and then smiled. Akim looked at her.

She states her bold ambitions, then smiles in glee. The patterns of child and adult interlock in her like the white and black on this game board.

Akim picked up a stone and rubbed it. “I’m sure both he and your father have a plan to deal with the rebels. Your father won’t allow an entire base to remain out of his control, I’m certain.”

She looked at him, her eyes dark. “No, he won’t.” She looked back down at the board. “In fact, his new shadow army is almost ready to go. Jin made a mistake taking Base Five...he knows very little about it, while my father and General Markos know every square centimeter. The rebels won’t last long in there.”

Akim set his stone down slowly. “Indeed. If the shadow army is ready to march, I’m certain that’s true.” He looked at her again. “Have you seen the shadow army, Mia?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t, but I know what they are. I know you

don't like them." She looked up at him, her jaw set. "Better they be killed than our loyal soldiers, don't you think?"

He stared at her. Her face had become hard, reminding him of Chairman Yang in his darker moments. Finally he nodded. "I suppose that's right." They both looked down at the board again.

Markos and the Chairman had access to the secret plans detailing Base Five, but Jin did not. Yet Akim also had access to those plans, on a small touchpanel that he had used years ago to plan the base's production facilities. No one had come to confiscate the plans, and Akim wondered if the Chairman had forgotten them.

Mia placed a stone. It was a good move, well thought out, but Akim saw a small opening in her territories that he would be able to exploit later. She was still a child, after all.

* * *

Jin Long hated the mines. The lower they got, the more downcast he felt, until he had sunk into a mood of black despair.

They were three hundred meters below the earth, in jagged, vaulted spaces carved from the rock. Spindly metal platforms and walkways crisscrossed over dark caverns, and in those caverns, under flickering orange lights, shattered humans labored against the unforgiving earth.

Jin stood at the railing on a long metal walkway and stared down. The drones had been lined up and left there during that attack, shackled by ankle and wrist in long rows. There were men and women and even some children, some dressed in thin uniforms but others with their uniforms worn away, naked except for crusted dirt. A single rebel labored at breaking the chains, one by one. They had not found the release keys.

Jin shook his head. Dirty equipment lay on the rocky ground. Plastic barrels sat near the blinded, blubbling drones who poured the extraction chemicals into the rock. A stocky man howled, and the howl echoed around them.

Ani choked and turned away from the railing.

“Let’s get down there,” said Jin. “And get the video cams ready. We’re going to save this for posterity.”

They located Doc, who waited in a large cavelike opening in the mines. Near him Jin could see a narrow metal door, set flush in a metal wall in the rock.

“This is too small and looks too solid to be storage for mining equipment,” said Jin. He touched the door himself. “No dust. Someone has kept this very clean.” He put his ear against the door, then motioned Ani to do the same.

“A banging sound,” she said. Her eyes had the mixture of curiosity and fear that children had on listening to ghost stories. “Metal on metal?”

“Something on metal,” said Jin. He backed up and looked around the door. “There’s no latch or even an opening for a coded key. We’ll have to blast it open.”

“More fireworks,” said Doc. He hustled off to round up some of the mining explosives.

Jin stared at the door, wondering what lay behind it.

* * *

Yang sat in the command center, reviewing maps and statistics from the rebel attack. His muscles had sunk into a pleasant lethargy, and he let the vapors from a cup of tea drift around his face as he read.

General Markos appeared in the strategy room and immediately approached Yang, his hands at his sides. He nodded. “I hear that you were sparring with one of the shadow army.”

“I was. He didn’t last long.”

“They’re slow and a little stupid, and the raw material varies widely. That’s part of my concern.” He frowned. “Chairman, you’re ordering me to assemble an army to cross the sea when we have no

defined strategy in place, and when the rebels have taken over an entire base here.”

“A small base.”

General Markos shook his head in disbelief. “But an entire base nonetheless! I know you’ve crushed these rebellions before, but this one feels different, Chairman. And why do we need to worry about the bloody settlements, anyway?”

“It’s a necessary evil, General. The rebellion concerns me, but we’ll use the shadow army against them, as planned. Then we’ll deal with the settlements.”

“When will we move against the rebels?”

“When we’re utterly certain of victory, General. I want to adjust the parameters of the army somewhat. For some to be a little slow is one thing, but the one I fought had no aggression. Surely that can be fixed.”

“Of course.” Markos scowled. “It’s going to be a chore trying to enter Base Five while the rebels control all choke points. These bases are meant to be highly defensible, after all.”

Yang smiled. “Yes. But I hope that the rebels will come to us.” He motioned Markos to the tactical table and opened some maps. Base Five was due north of the Hive, both of them close to the shore. “What do the rebels want, Markos?”

Markos frowned. “Forgive me, but I hate riddles, Chairman. I’d guess they want freedom.”

“They won’t get it while I’m alive,” said Yang. “And there’s no way for them to get from Base Five to the Hive except by relaying through Base Two.”

Markos nodded. “Unless they go through the warrens.”

“Ah.” Yang shifted the map to reveal the warrens, a tangle of natural tunnels that lay between the two bases. “The warrens, our first home here when we Crossed the sea.”

“A fight in there would be difficult,” said Markos. He pointed. “The tunnels are narrow and confusing. It would be a free-for-all.”

“But if we can keep them in the tunnels, Markos.” Yang touched a button, and a thin line appeared to the west of the warrens, on the opposite side from the sea. “This is the route of our experimental magtube. It hasn’t been built, but the initial tunnel has been dug. We could easily push through the rock and into the warrens at several spots along its length.”

Markos’s eyes widened. “If we occupied that tunnel, the rebels would be flanked. We could pick them off at our leisure.”

Yang nodded. “Whoever controls the terrain controls the battle. If the rebels found their way into the warrens, we would have them.”

Markos nodded. “But they don’t know the way yet. The passageway to the warrens was sealed behind rock.”

“Go assemble the army, and make the adjustments I’ve asked for. We’ll give them some time. I’m sure Jin will find it somehow.”

* * *

General Markos left, and Yang stood up and began pacing, loosening his muscles.

This rebellion did feel different, as if dark shadows from his past had come to beat their wings about his head. But even General Markos lacked the vision to see why Yang wanted to cross the sea.

He, Chairman Yang, intended to live as long as the Human Hive existed, or there was no point to the Hive at all. His citizens would live and die, and generations would rise and fall beneath the earth, and he fully intended to see it all.

The loss of the key probe agents in Zakharov’s labs had jeopardized that. His people, who lived their whole lives in his communal tomb, couldn’t understand his urgency. They didn’t understand the shadow army, and why he actually *needed* the rebels to serve as a terrible example to the other citizens.

His very life was at stake. He, the Chairman, always looked to the future, but it was his own future, not the Hive's, that was most in jeopardy.

* * *

Akim picked up the simple ceramic mug of mint tea and left the refreshment bar, walking down a broad passage toward the central shaft. Once there he sat at a small stone table and watched as darkness suffused the base.

He took a sip of the tea, wondering for the thousandth time if the Gaians grew better teas in their lush gardens. There were few people out at this hour, but the luxury of old age was that he could sit, and watch, and he had nowhere to go and nothing of importance to do.

Or do I?

He took another sip of the tea and thought of Jin Long, the rebel, barricaded into Base Five. He had met the man, when he had been a Grand Advisor, several times. The last time had been right after Akim had visited the secret labs, and seen the gestation of the new shadow army. Akim hadn't mentioned any reservations about the shadow army, but he had thought even then that Jin could read something in his eyes.

He lifted his mug, and then froze as something scuffled in the darkness. He could see around the entire perimeter of the shaft, and the shadows that pressed in from all sides, but there wasn't a soul moving.

He got up and walked softly away from the table, pushing quietly through the branches of a stunted juniper, specially bred to grow underground.

In the soft moss of one of the tiny gardens, two citizens lay, a man and a woman, their dark clothes wrapped around them. They undulated softly in the darkness, both of them with eyes closed, and Akim thought they probably imagined a place much more beautiful and lush than the dark stone around them.

She was on top, and as she arched her back her lips parted, but no sound came out. He knew he should report them to a hiveguard, but seeing her bite back her passion, afraid to make even a sound, he couldn't do it. Of course, if someone saw him fail to report the activity, then *he* would be in contempt.

He eased away from them, and back to his tea. The water, which had been lukewarm to begin with, was now tepid.

He glanced around once more at the dark base, and then he pulled a small golden pendant from his pouch. The pendant looked like two cranes with interlaced wings, and it was cleverly designed to pop open when pressed a certain way.

Inside the pendant was a datachip, which contained the map he had downloaded from his forgotten touchpanel. It was a map of the warrens, and if Jin Long had it, he would make good use of it, Akim was sure.

He thought of Chairman Yang, who had been a young idealist once, fired up with the vision of a utopian society. It had all gone bad somehow, wrecking a thousand lives with it. He fingered the pendant, brushing his finger along the wings of the crane, remembering.

The two citizens slipped away from the gardens next to him, shadows in the greater darkness. Akim huddled his robes about him and headed down to the next-lower level of the base, to contact a man he hoped was still there.

* * *

Jin stood back as Doc and another rebel worked the giant claw drills that forced open the narrow metal door. Finally the claw drill shrieked, and the door abruptly tore from its hinges, leaving a narrow black rectangle.

Jin stared into it. From beyond came the metallic banging sounds, which now sounded like a padded club being swung at a metal plate. Narrow fingers of red light seeped from somewhere in that darkness.

He looked at Doc and Ani, who had shifted back a few steps. Their exuberance carried them far in the face of the Chairman, but what leaked from this door was something darker, and far more evil.

“Hand me the glowlight,” he said. “I’ll not let the Chairman frighten me.”

But as he took the glowlight, and shined it into the narrow, dark opening, he felt as if he were throwing a handful of dirt into an empty grave. The light seemed small, and utterly inconsequential in that darkness. He stepped through the doorway.

* * *

“The black box has been opened, Chairman,” said the attendant who appeared at the door. The man literally shook from fear.

Yang nodded, staring at the touchscreen in front of him. “Tell General Markos to block all transmissions to and from Base Five. We won’t let the rebels send out word of our experiments.”

The attendant disappeared again. Yang thought of the secret labs, and how they looked the last time he visited them. Then he imagined Jin, stretched out on one of those tables, and with that thought he flicked off the touchscreen.

In spite of the news about the labs being opened, things were going well. The rebel communications from Base Five would be jammed, the access points from Base Five to the other bases were guarded, and the shadow army was being assembled. And his spies overseas indicated that Morgan was testing the equipment he had purchased from Zakharov. It was like throwing fusion pellets into a fire pit.

He would head for one of his ninety-nine sleeping chambers, as he always did. It was time to rest.

* * *

Jin Long pushed through the doorway and into a long room with metal walls and ceiling, all a strange rusty color. He could hear a skittering sound in the darkness, and he shined his light along one wall, revealing a bank of wire mesh cages. Small creatures scurried

in the shadows, away from the light, and tiny eyes glowed in the darkness.

“Hybrid rats,” said Doc, his voice shaking.

Jin moved in closer, shining his light across the rats while Doc leaned in to study them. “Strange,” Doc said. “They all have that same black mark on the tail.” He bent down to study the cages below. “And these are all females down here, and they all have two brown spots on the back.”

“Leave it alone,” said Jin, as the tiny eyes watched him. “We aren’t here for rats.”

The banging had grown louder, and now Jin continued toward another doorway through which the long red fingers of light crept. He shined his light in, sending long shadows all over the metal walls.

“Oh, no,” he heard Ani say behind him. “Oh, Chiron.”

Human figures lay on low metal beds, the beds poorly constructed so that jagged metal burrs stuck out all over. Heavy cabinets stood around the room, some open so that Jin could see the equipment inside—heavy straps, thin, glistening wires, large weights, and other odd-looking implements.

But it was the human figures, or what was left of them, that captured his attention. They were naked, some with flesh flayed open to the bone. They lay strapped to the bed, heads stretched out from their necks by thick metal collars, thin ridges covering their bodies from head to toe. One of the drones had somehow worked his leg free, and he was hitting his leg against the bed over and over, making the metallic banging that they had heard.

Jin felt his stomach turn over again, and he heard Ani gasp behind him. Doc made a series of choking sounds.

Jin walked over to the nearest figure and pointed to it. “Nerve stapled,” he said. All along the woman’s body fibrous staples had been driven through her flesh and into the delicate webbing of

nerves underneath. These staples were held by tiny filaments that glowed with a strange light.

“They’re living in a world of pain we couldn’t imagine,” said Jin.

Doc gave a garbled cry from the other side of the room. “Inscore!” he finally choked. He turned to Jin and pointed to the figure with the banging leg.

“This is Inscore. This is one of the rebels who disappeared during his work shift.”

“Get the cameras,” said Jin. “Someone has to record all this.”

* * *

Akim wound his way down to the lower levels of the Hive, and into a large room where rough metal pipes snaked their way from the ceiling and into a series of massive tanks. He heard hissing and bubbling in the darkness, and smelled waste and chemicals.

He crossed the floor of the room until he reached a metal ladder, and climbed it carefully, steeling himself as he got higher and higher off the floor. Finally he reached the top and pushed his frail body over onto a metal platform.

A short man in a thick, rough apron watched him impassively. Akim collected himself, then stood up and walked over to the man.

Beneath the platform a liquidy waste churned in a large tank. The smell hit Akim like a fist, even stronger than below—rotted food, sewage, and other decaying things overlaid with an acrid disinfectant smell. Globes of half-congealed fluid fell from above and into the churning soup.

“So this is the final resting place,” said Akim.

“You’d know better than me,” grunted the man. He stared at Akim. “What do you want, former Grand Advisor?”

From his robes Akim took the crane pendant and extended it to the man.

“Throw it away,” the man muttered, nodding his head toward the tanks. “It’ll be fished out later, if it might hurt the Hive.”

“Ah.” Akim looked into the soupy mass, and hoped this man was who he thought he was. He threw the pendant into the soup, with the datachip hidden inside, and watched as it hit the surface and then began to sink below. “That was very important,” said Akim. “Life or death, perhaps.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Akim shrugged. “I’ve got nothing to lose. And that pendant.” He nodded toward the soupy mass, and felt his throat constrict for a moment. “That pendant once belonged to my wife.”

He turned and carefully climbed back onto the ladder. The man stared after him, and as Akim reached the floor he heard the churning of the great tank stop.

* * *

“Can you speak?”

Jin Long aimed the video cam at one tortured man’s head. The man’s head was shaved, and tiny ridges of nerve staples ran along the reddened skull. Muscles stood out around his wasted throat. As far as Jin could tell, the man saw only an internal landscape of pain.

Jin ran the camera down the man’s body, taking in the wounds, the bones and blood where the skin was flayed away, the nerve staples. He glanced over at Doc and Ani, who crouched over another victim, trying to pull the nerve staples from her forearms.

Jin turned back and kneeled next to the man’s face. He leaned in close to him, studying the pores on the man’s face, running his eyes along the ridge of his nose, looking into those haunted eyes.

“What did you do to him?” Jin said softly, almost too softly for the man to hear. The man’s eye flickered once over at Jin and then back to the ceiling.

Jin touched one of the staples in the man's cheek, brushing it gently with his fingertip. Slowly, he pushed at the staple, sending it deeper into the man's skin. Instantly a new sheen of sweat covered the man's face.

"You're beyond saving, aren't you?" he asked, his voice so soft not even Ani or Doc could hear him. "He has broken you."

Jin took the man's head in both hands and turned it slowly. On the back of the man's head was a long, jagged gash, crusted with blood and oozing pus. Jutting from part of the wound was a piece of metal.

"A failed experiment," said Jin. "A rebel, and a reject from the shadow army."

His right hand floated up from his belt, holding a tiny injector gun. He put the gun on the man's neck, watched the eyes flicker for a moment more, and then pulled the trigger.

There was a puff of air. The man jerked once, and from his open mouth came a final gasping sob.

"Kill all of these people," said Jin, standing up. "They're hopeless. Doc, continue to search the lab. Somewhere in here are probably weapons for the shadow army."

Doc's mouth hung open in despair.

Suddenly, all three of their quicklinks buzzed at once. Jin looked down at his. "I've stopped receiving," he said.

"Me, too," said Ani.

"We're being jammed," said Jin. "Finish up here, and let's get back to the upper levels."

* * *

Cunning

Chairman Yang lay in the darkness, listening to his daughter's

breath. He found it strangely soothing, until she began to speak again.

“I almost beat Akim at Go today, Father” “Almost? There’s no almost in defeat, Mia.”

He heard her breath quicken, then slow again in the darkness. “Why don’t you teach me how to beat him, then? I have to learn, unless you want me following General Markos and Akim around like a puppy dog.”

“You’re more independent than that, Mia.”

“True.” He heard satisfaction in her voice. “But I’m still your daughter. Didn’t Earth mammals imprint on their biological parents after birth?”

He had her there. He considered his daughter, and Akim, and the playing of games. “If you’d like to play a game, Mia, perhaps I could show you a new one.”

“Really?” His willingness had caught her off guard. “When?”

“Now.”

He sat up and activated the glowlight. She sat in her white sleeping robe, her slender legs cast over one arm of a large chair. He climbed out of bed, and she hopped down to follow him.

* * *

“Put these goggles on, and hit the activate switch there.”

“Yes. I...Oh.” She made a series of gasping sounds. “At first I saw nothing but gray space, but now images are forming.”

“Those are...”

“...your thoughts,” he finished as an entity inside the virtual world. He saw her floating, a long, cloudy white figure that pulsed with something deep and feminine. Yang began to wonder if this had been a good idea.

He shaped his form into the black and red angular fluctuation that he favored, and moved closer to her.

“Is that you, Father?”

“It is. This is one grand experiment—the virtual world. A consensual projection of thoughts into a virtual space.”

Her avatar darted away, and streaks of white fire fell like stars beneath her. “Fantastic! Can I...” A flash of white filled the world beneath them, leaving a shining white surface that stretched on in every direction. “Wonderful!”

She had caught on quickly. Yang touched the white surface, and a dark tongue curled out, cutting her plane in two, then surrounding each side.

Her avatar grew still as she studied his challenge. Another flash of white bisected his tongue of darkness, but he quickly snaked around it and cut it cleanly into two sections, then four, then eight, faster than she could keep up.

White flashes began in four corners, converging inward and pressing Yang’s territories. He created a vortex of black that sucked the whiteness in and threw it out into a thousand glimmering specks.

But she had learned to let each speck expand, and suddenly he had a thousand growing cells to worry about.

Their mock battle raged on, as white and black flashed across the vast plane. Mia quickly expanded on her thousand-speck strategy, joining them in patterns like stars and grids, while he fought to expand the vortex and swallow them all.

At last she ringed the plane in white, building an impenetrable border. The board remained static, crackling with irresolvable tensions.

“Well,” she said. “What do you think of my play, Father?”

His avatar pulsed for a moment. Then it curved into something like

a smile. “Look up, Mia.”

She did look up, into the virtual space. Above her, and all around her, black stars burned, surrounding her utterly.

“Oh.”

Yang disconnected from the virtual world, and filed that spool under *cunning*, and *victory*.

Chapter Four

Lady Deirdre found herself in a deep, velvety darkness. She was beneath her sheets, still clothed, and she could see the dim outlines of her chambers through the moonlight shining in through the windows. But there were no human-made lights around her—not an indicator, or a touchpanel, or even the line of light beneath her door.

She slipped out of the bed, and felt herself moving as if in a dream. Her bare feet made no noise as they touched the floor, and she found herself standing at her windows without any recollection of crossing the room.

Outside, a soft purple light bathed the rolling hills. She could see the lamps of her citizens drifting in and out of the darkness around the xenofields, and she felt a sudden desire to go outside and walk among them. She went to her closet and took out her pressure suit, the tough, stretchy fabric designed to protect her outside. And when she pulled the suit onto her body it felt as if she were pulling on a new skin, taut with youthful strength.

And then she seemed to drift down from the top of the central tower of the High Garden, down into the dusky half-light of the xenofields.

She passed a Gaian patrol, two men and one woman, moving knee-deep through the crimson fungal tubes at the edge of the fields. They kept looking at the two moons in the sky, Nessus and Pholus, especially Nessus which hung pregnant with light above them, and then they looked at the mysterious shapes of the xenofields, and then they looked back at each other.

She slipped past them into the xenofields, and she thought she could see a strange electric light rippling through the fungal spores around her. Where the crimson tubules brushed past her legs they caused phantom feelings, as they always did, but while in the past

they had often felt slimy, or like a burning scratch, she now felt a warmth that bloomed from their touch.

So this is why the young people come to the fields at night I've heard them speak of these sensations, but it's been a long time since I felt them.

And now she remembered how at some point during her leadership her feelings toward Chiron's native life had changed, as if the world itself had turned on her for some reason, taking back its secrets and passing them instead to her young, Planet-born and Planet-raised scientists.

Is that why I've banished myself to the chambers above the world?

The thought slipped away unanswered. She could see twinkling lights receding deeper into the xenofields, and she followed them, excited that Planet might be welcoming her back. She scarcely thought of the warnings against straying too deeply into the fields without a partner or chaperon, preferring, as always, to go it alone.

She pushed deeper into the fields, letting the warmth wash over her, over her belly and arms and back, and she began to remember the hum of the wormsong and tile studies she now wanted to undertake, long delayed by the demands of leadership.

The fungus got higher around her, now above her head, and then it opened up so that she felt as if she walked through a small crimson valley, rippling with color and light. And then suddenly she felt a chill against her skin, like a brisk gust of cool air.

She closed her eyes, and felt something cold beneath her feet. The sudden smell of pine pierced her pressure mask, not the vaguely spicy smell of her hybrid pines, but the fresh smell of an Earth pine, almost forgotten. She opened her eyes to see what looked like a field, blanketed in white, and a dark figure in the center of it. The icy wind blew harder and chilled her to the bone.

Deirdre, said a voice, deep and terrifying, yet strangely familiar.

The valley seemed to close in around her, and she fell into darkness.

Her quicklink awakened her, beeping urgently with a priority incoming message. She ignored it for a moment, trying to reorient herself.

She lay in her chambers, on her bed on top of the sheets. She was wearing her pressure suit.

The alert from the quicklink got louder. She answered it, distracted, as she studied her clothes, looking for signs of red earth, or scuff marks, or anything to indicate she had been outside. There was nothing.

"I'm here," she said. The concerned face of Goldman appeared in her link.

"Lady Skye, we have some trouble."

"Yes?" She looked around her room. It was mid-morning, judging from the light outside.

"It's Director Morgan. He's moved equipment to the edge of our territory."

"What?" She focused on Goldman. "What do you mean?"

"Mining equipment, Lady. Twelve Morgan drills, setting up in the forests at the edge of Gaian territory."

"I'll meet you in the command center," she said, and broke the link.

* * *

In the command center, Deirdre bent over the large tactical display table with Goldman. "Twelve Morgan drills and more than twenty supporting units, all with that slick Morganite look," he said. "The supporting units could be anything, but you can bet some of them are military."

Deirdre studied the display, which had contour lines and markers for the edge of her territory, acknowledged by settlement law. Just outside the territory line were her tree-covered hillsides, and then a series of yellow crosses indicating the drills and supporting units.

She pointed to one and popped open a video link to get a close-up, the video fed from cameras mounted in sensors at her territory's edge. "That's a drill all right." The video feed showed a large metallic machine, covered in shiny silver-gray armor, with a grooved appendage folded over its back. It looked to Deirdre like a huge metal bug, ready to suck the life from her adopted world.

The door to the command center opened, and Simper hurried in. He looked over the tactical display and read the situation quickly. "I was afraid of this. I told you he wants that territory."

"You won't be hearing any mea culpas today, Simper," said Goldman.

Simper ignored him and took control of the camera, scanning it right and left. Beyond the drill several long, translucent tents unfolded across the ground like pale caterpillars, inflating as they did.

"They're setting up camp. Those are their new pressure tents, far more modern than anything we've got. They'll have all the comforts of home."

"Better than our field tents, Simper?"

Simper stared at Goldman. "Better than anything you've ever slept in, here or in the fields."

"Enough," said Deirdre. "Have you got anything else that will help us, Simper?"

"The drills are very high-tech, silksteel, the kind of technology we could benefit from, if we wanted it. Those drills could chew up a hillside in hours." He shook his head.

"What about the other equipment?"

Simper shrugged. "Portable guard posts, supply transports, some military. It's hard to tell. Morgan has interchangeable vehicles—he just pops on whatever chassis he needs. But I doubt this camp will be undefended. And there are those new trance weapons to think about."

“If they exist,” said Goldman.

The drills had now taken up their positions in a perfect semicircle at the bottom of the forested hills just outside her territory. “Why there? Why those hills?”

“He’s making a point,” said Simper.

“I want him out of there, now.”

“Scouts are on their way.”

Goldman jerked his head up and pointed a finger at Simper. “I’m the military commander here. You have no right to send scouts into a potentially dangerous situation without my authorization!”

Simper pursed his lips. “I’m the liaison with Morgan. This is a diplomatic situation.”

“It’s a powder keg!”

“Incoming message. Lady Skye,” said one of the busy techs in the command center. “Priority. From Director Morgan.”

“I’ll take it,” she said.

The face that appeared on the link screen was not Morgan’s, but instead the face of a beautiful woman with mocha-colored skin. The high quality of her clothes was evident even over the video link, and she wore elegant jewelry as well. She smiled when she saw them. Deirdre was instantly aware that all movement in the command center had stopped as people stared at the woman.

“Lady Skye,” she said, and nodded. “My name is Shani Azima. I regret that Director Morgan can’t contact you at this time, but he assumed you would have noticed our equipment by now.”

“We noticed it.” Deirdre’s voice shook with anger. She felt old and unkempt next to this elegant young woman, and she cursed herself for not moving to her private office to receive the communication. “I would like it removed from our territory immediately.” The woman smiled. “Of course if our equipment is in your officially

recognized territory, we'll move it immediately. But my understanding is that we are in fact on neutral ground. Please let me know if I'm wrong."

"You're on disputed territory, and Director Morgan knows it. We won't stand for you preempting the will of the Planetary Council."

"I'm sure Director Morgan has no such intention. But I can have him contact you later if you wish to discuss it."

"Yes. I want to speak with him sooner, not later." Lady Deirdre struggled to maintain her cool. "We're sending scouts out to welcome your units. It's a peaceful mission, so don't fire on them."

The woman nodded. "I don't think we'll need your hospitality, Lady Skye, but I'll relay your concerns to Director Morgan." She flashed a quick, dazzling smile. "Morganites out."

A moment of silence followed, then slowly the activity in the room began to return to normal. Deirdre felt the pulse of a headache coming on.

"I'm going to contact Pravin Lal, from a private office," she said. "Position our scouts so close to the Morgan drills that you could spit on them. Don't let them move."

"They're not officially on our territory, Lady," said Simper.

"Goldman is in charge of the scouts, not you. Goldman, don't let them move."

He nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, Lady." Deirdre left the room in a hurry, heading for a private office nearby.

* * *

The private office was one of many for the command staff to use, small and rather sterile, with just a desk and a secure touchscreen, and the ubiquitous potted plant. Deirdre sat at the desk and put in a priority diplomatic message to Pravin Lal.

As the leader of the Planetary Council, Pravin was the first link in

the diplomatic chain that would result in a legal action to extend Deirdre's territories. It took a while for her message to work its way through Pravin's series of handlers, as it always did with him and his bureaucracy. When his face did finally appear he looked grim and cheerless, his pale brown complexion sallow with fatigue. He looked no better than the last time she had seen him in Council.

"Pravin, this is Deirdre Skye of the Gaians," she said.

"Of course." His face remained still, with almost no animation. She shook her head inwardly at what had once been a proud, idealistic man, and a friend. His defeat at the hands of the Spartans, though now more than seventy years before, had turned him into a husk of a leader. He still led bases, and still talked about expansion, and still led the Planetary Council, but it all seemed to be for show.

In fact, the very reason he was elected Planetary Governor is because he's not perceived as a threat. The others tolerate him because he lacks the will to use his power against them.

"I want you to know that Morgan has set up drills at the edge of my territory. He's occupied land that I seeded, and that I want turned over to Gaian control at the next Council meeting."

"I know the land." His somber mood was draining the anger out of her and giving rise to a vague sense of hopelessness. "I'm surprised Director Morgan would antagonize you this way, Deirdre."

"I'm not surprised at all! He wants the land, Pravin. He wants the minerals there, and he's staking a claim. I would like the Council to issue a restraining order and force his drills back into his own territory."

"Force?" Pravin stared at her. "We have to work together for the greater good of the settlements, Deirdre. You know that. I won't order his vehicles away when we have a Council meeting in only twenty days."

"Then I need the Council meeting moved up, Pravin. I can't tolerate drills at the edge of my most precious forests. They're Earth forests, Pravin, growing and thriving on alien soil!"

"I'm sure they're impressive." He shook his head. "I'll consult the Council on changing the time of the meeting. I suppose a quick resolution would be in all of our best interests."

Deirdre stared at Pravin, at his face which had changed little in decades, and at his eyes which had changed a lot. She felt a rage at his helplessness, and she had to reach far back into the past to remember the terrible things that had happened to him—the death of his wife, his son, and his grandson in one brutal day, and the breaching of his once great city.

"Do you think this is the start of more violence, Pravin? Is that why you're afraid?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "I'm not afraid, Deirdre. Things will resolve themselves in time. It's natural that there be...frictions."

"But you believe this is a turning point."

He remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head. "It's a small conflict. There's a big world out there. I'm certain that we can work it out."

"I'm an idealist, too, Pravin."

"I'll contact you about moving the Council meeting. Good day, Deirdre."

With that, his face vanished.

* * *

Deirdre called Goldman to meet her in a small windowed conference room nearby. He arrived quickly, and Simper bustled in after him.

"Well, we have ourselves a standoff," said Simper.

Goldman sat down at the table and folded his rough hands together. "We've put our scouts and rovers in a long line near the trees. If the Morganites attack, Gaian lives will be lost."

“Our citizens won’t like that,” said Simper, staring out the narrow window in the conference room.

“Morgan won’t do it,” said Goldman. “He won’t kill Gaian citizens for the sake of some land.”

Deirdre nodded. “I think you’re right. Things haven’t reached a crisis point yet.” She plucked the hem of her clothes, feeling the rough-sewn fabric there. She looked Goldman straight in the eye.

“I’ve asked them to move up the Council meeting to as soon as possible. Governor Lal is—” She shook her head, her dark hair rustling. “He’s lost his way. He has no firm grip over the Council. But the rest of them may listen to reason.”

“Good, Lady Skye. It’s my duty to add that if Morgan does choose to attack us, our scouts probably aren’t strong enough to withstand him.”

“What about the mindworms?” Deirdre asked.

“No one on the Council knows the true extent of our research into the native life. They don’t know how fine our control is, or the size of the boil someone like Lindly could raise.”

Simper pulled out a chair noisily and sat down. “Have you forgotten the trance technology I’ve told you about?”

Goldman shook his head. “It can’t be that advanced, or we would have seen it by now. Morgan doesn’t know how far we’ve come.”

Deirdre nodded. “The mindworms may be our only chance, anyway. I’m afraid this conflict is about more than a tract of forests.”

“How so?” Goldman arched one brow, and even Simper fell silent.

“They want to annex us,” said Deirdre. “They see us with our farms and rich lands, and our specialized knowledge. They know we have few weapons. We’re either an asset to be acquired or a thorn in their sides.”

“That’s absurd!”

Deirdre shook her head. "I can't know for sure. But I feel I'm right."

"We should open a trade agreement with Morgan right away!" Simper protested. "We could make this work to our advantage."

Deirdre looked at Simper, at his foppish robes and narrow-beaked face. She felt disgust twist in her belly at these late-generation Planet-born, so far removed from the tragedy that brought humanity to this world. "Then the way of life we believe in would die. The way of life you once believed in, too, Simper, before you got your taste for Morganite luxury."

"You live as well as any, Lady," he muttered.

"I'll forget you said that, one time only, Simper. I'm still your commander." She looked at him and Goldman. "I'm going down to the biolabs now. I plan to involve myself in certain key experiments concerning the native life."

"Is this the best time for that, Lady?" asked Goldman.

"It may be now or never. If you need me, I'll be in the labs." She got up and left the two of them without another word.

* * *

Deirdre walked to a secure lift that took her below Planet's surface and into the shielded biolabs. In a reception room off the lift she waited in a plastic chair for Sylvie, and as she waited she looked around at the sterile gray walls, bathed in artificial light. On a small table a fungal bloom wilted in a glass vase.

A door opened, and Sylvie greeted her, dressed in the yellow uniform of Gaian lab techs. Among the Gaians only the military and the scientists had any kind of standards of dress, but even here she could see that Sylvie had cut the sleeves off her jumpsuit and let the zipper on the front drift several centimeters down, revealing a hint of bony cleavage. Sylvie shook Deirdre's hand, and her grip felt tight and cool.

"Let's go this way, Lady Deirdre." She took her back through the doorway and down several hallways, all gray and featureless,

walking quickly. She seemed nervous, and finally started talking while she walked.

“Lady Skye, I know you’re the leader of the Gaians and so your word is law.”

“Within reason,” said Deirdre.

“Right. But as a scientist, I have to tell you that we don’t know much about this new technology. Several of our best brood trainers have used it, even Lindly, and they’ve felt things, but nothing has really happened, good or bad. For all we know, this could be dangerous.”

“I’ve studied this technology extensively, Sylvie. In fact, I initiated the experiments. Reading your reports, I have reason to believe that we can do better.” She thought again of the wormsong, and Lindly’s mindworms arcing into the sky at her urging.

“The experiments might foil absolutely.”

“Then the Gaian way of life is in jeopardy, Sylvie.” Deirdre looked at her. “We need more than just an exciting new technology. We need a way to coordinate the movements of the mindworms, and we need it fast. Now take me to the empath chair.”

“Yes, Lady.” Sylvie quickened her pace.

She led Deirdre through a series of secured metal doors, getting deeper into the lab complex. Finally they ended up in a small room, irregularly shaped, with a number of glass panels set in the wall. In the center of the room sat a large reclining chair with all manner of translucent cables twisting around it. Through the glass panels in the wall Deirdre could see small clumps of xenofungus bathed in strange, warm lights.

“This xenofungus is actually connected to the fields topside, and also by those wires into this chair, we think,” said Sylvie.

“I thought you said you’d run tests already.”

“We have, most particularly on Lindly herself. She picks up heavy

psyche energy resembling that of the mindworms, and she swears that she senses a larger presence beyond, but then some resistance builds up and pushes her out of her trance. It's not at all clear what's doing the pushing—the presence, her own subconscious—or if it's just a big hallucination.” She clucked her tongue. “It's all new to us.”

Lady Deirdre stopped, staring at the chair and the strangely lit xenofungus behind it. Sylvie hesitated. “Are you sine you want to go through with this, Lady Skye?”

“Of course.” *Why not?*

Deirdre removed her tunic and handed it to Sylvie, then sat down in the chair. Sylvie attached small rubbery discs to various places on her head and torso.

“If anything happens, we'll zap you out,” she said. “A hypnotist will facilitate your entry. Good luck, Lady Skye.”

Sylvie patted Deirdre on the arm and then faded into the shadows behind the chair. Deirdre felt the cool rubbery discs on her skin and looked up at the ceiling, which was featureless. She was aware of the warm lights at the periphery of her vision, bathing the xenofungus, which was so alien to her. But natural. She held on to that feeling—that she loved this world more than her own flesh.

A bald man in gray stepped out of the shadows and spoke to her quietly. She stared into his blue eyes, which seemed to grow very large as he murmured to her, and she felt as if she were falling forward into those eyes. Her body grew weak, and then heavy, and she was dimly aware of her eyes rolling back into her head. She found herself floating in a dark world...and then she saw, or felt, a tendril of light, pulsing with an irregular rhythm. She studied it, hardly daring to think, wanting to know what it was. As she studied it she became aware that it connected to something else in the darkness, and that whatever it was connected to also connected to something else, and that this chain might be as large as the world, but the darkness kept her from seeing it all.

She started prodding the tendril with her thoughts, gently, trying to

turn it in her mind. As she touched it, she thought she heard rushing water, and then that faded and she caught the smell of burnt cinnamon, and then a feeling of ice on her belly.

Then suddenly a vision rushed into her mind, of a man she had loved on Earth, a man with strong hands and a rough face. For some reason she was reliving the feeling she had on first seeing him, that guardedness coupled with the first touch of passion. And then they became lovers, and had remained so until the destruction...

The destruction of the Earth...

At the smallest thought of doomed Earth the tendril-thing recoiled from her, and she felt a sudden stabbing pain in her head. Her heart began to pound, filling her mind with pulses of crimson light, and she was dimly aware of her body shaking. The tendril thing whipped away, vanishing into the vast darkness, and she got a fleeting impression of infinite space torn by a crude terror.

With a shout she returned to the real world, to the empath chair, sweat bathing her skin. Memories of what she had seen rushed away from her, like a wave returning to sea though grasping fingers. She heard rapid footsteps, and then Sylvie stood above her.

"We pulled you out," she said, using her fingers to spread open Deirdre's eyes so she could look into them. "Are you all right?"

"I'm OK," said Deirdre. The room looked small and dark to her now, and Sylvie looked pale and ugly. She felt a deep sadness bubbling up inside her, knowing that she had missed touching something larger and deeper than she could comprehend. "I felt something. Something big. And I saw patterns." She swallowed. "I want to go back."

Sylvie studied her carefully. "Nothing forced you out?"

Deirdre shook her head. "It was my fault. I thought of Earth, and it left me."

"What left you?"

“The thing. The patterns. The feelings.” Deirdre shook her head. “I need to go back.”

“Let me debrief you, and give you a chance to rest. Your heartbeat hit two hundred for a moment before we pulled you out. We have to analyze all this.”

Deirdre nodded. Indeed, her heart thumped like a jackhammer, and she remembered again that she was living on borrowed time. Her hand touched her chest.

“Are you all right, Lady Skye?”

Deirdre nodded, sucking deep breaths in through her mouth, but with every breath she felt a stabbing pain in her chest.

“I’ll rest,” she said.

* * *

Deirdre lay in her bed, breathing deeply. As her heartbeat had slowed and the panic passed, she felt a warmth inside her belly, and she smiled to herself. She still had it—her skills, her intuition, her love of the world. They had allowed her to see something that none of the brood trainers had yet experienced.

It’s amazing what a hundred years of maturity will do for you.

She sat up, touching her forehead. The aching in her joints had increased since her experience in the empath chair, and her head hurt. She let out a sigh. Too much stress in too little time. She would have to try to be more careful next time...

Next time. Her mind was already drifting back to her vague memories of the patterns, and the way they connected to something bigger, and then something even bigger beyond that. She had sensed alien thought landscapes, things that were indescribable in their vastness, yet crude and basic, like a simple organism from the sea that had grown to the size of a world.

Yes! That was it. She would have to put that into her research journals...

Her quicklink beeped with a priority incoming message. She walked to a touchscreen set up in the corner of her chambers to take the message, which was from Pravin Lal.

The face that appeared on her touchscreen wasn't Pravin Lal, but instead the face of an old woman with snowy white hair and wrinkled skin. She sat in a large, soft chair and wore the pale blue uniform of a Peacekeeper leader, but she also had a thick white blanket draped over her legs. The room behind her looked comfortable and safe, with soft lighting and subdued hangings on the wall. The woman trembled, and Deirdre thought that she had seldom seen anyone so frail, yet so noble.

The woman smiled when she saw Deirdre, her head trembling slightly. "Is that Deirdre Skye?" she asked in a husky voice.

"Yes."

The woman nodded. "I remember. You came to my wedding."

At that moment Deirdre saw the ID tag on the woman's uniform, and memories rushed in, long forgotten, of a simple room with glass walls and vases of hybrid flowers, and Pravin Lal and his son. His son's wedding, seventy years before.

"I remember you. You're Sophia Lal." Deirdre felt a chill. Sophia Lal was the wife of Pravin's son and one of the most respected leaders in the settlements. Deirdre hadn't even known that she was still alive, or that she still helped lead the Peacekeepers.

The woman nodded and took a small swallow of water from a glass next to her. "That's me. Pravin asked me to talk to you."

"What did he want you to say?"

"He wanted me to tell you things. At least I think he wants me to tell you." She laughed quietly. "He didn't come right out and say it, but I think he knew I would tell you things I'm not supposed to say. I'm the oldest Peacekeeper around, and I don't have much to lose."

"What kinds of things?"

“First of all, the Council meeting has been moved. It’s in four days, as you wanted. But the rest...” She sighed. “You’re too far from the rest of us, Lady Skye; in your heart, I mean. You don’t want our technology, for the most part, and you don’t want to build much.”

“Not more than Planet can stand, it’s true.”

“There are those who supported you somewhat, but the others, especially the men, Zakharov and Morgan, they just don’t think your way will work. And they think you’re holding back.”

“Holding back what?” Deirdre bristled with indignation, even though she knew exactly what Sophia referred to.

“The attacks of the mindworms on Morgan are bad, much worse than he would like you to know. He’s lost a lot of property, and lives, and he thinks you’re the cause. He wants all of your information about Chiron and the native life forms, every bit of it. And if you don’t give it to him, he’s going to seek retribution.”

“My datalinks are open to everyone in the settlements, just like everyone else.”

Sophia shook her head. “I think we both know that’s not true, Lady.” She fixed Deirdre with a stare, from eyes that were still beautiful under folds of aged flesh. “Pravin respects you, but he thinks a reckoning is coming. He thinks you should know...they want your secret research files, and they want to annex you to the Morganites.”

Deirdre shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

“It doesn’t seem right, but they’re going to try. So be prepared. As you suspect, this Council meeting is about a lot more than a few hillsides.” She smiled. “Good-bye, Lady Skye.”

The image of Sophia vanished. Deirdre stared at the screen, wondering again how many of Morgan’s nearby units had military capability.

Then she thought of Sophia. The woman was old, about thirty-six in Earth years when the mission landed, which would make her over

one hundred twenty now. Deirdre wondered if Pravin was still getting genetic treatments from Zakharov, and, if so, had she grown farther away from the others than she had intended.

Four days later

Deirdre left the High Garden in her armored speeder, *Gaia One*, on her way to the meeting of the Planetary Council. The speeder with its slower escorts passed along the hillside overlooking the Morgan encampment; she could see the camp set up in rings, with widely spaced guard posts on the outer ring, long webbed bubbletents in the middle, and the drills and other heavy equipment on the inside. Morganites in their uniforms stood guard or walked between the bubbletents, those off duty laughing and carrying drinks and food, some engaged in games of skill at a makeshift shooting range. Her Gaian forces in their green uniforms were arranged in two haphazard lines along the hills, and the disparity between her and the Morganites gave her a twinge of embarrassment.

“Look at our ragtag scouts,” muttered Simper, vocalizing her thoughts. “Morgan will have us for lunch.” He huddled his best wrap about him, a sleek, dark gray number with gold trim.

“Let him choke on us,” muttered Deirdre.

The convoy left Gaian territory and kicked into high speed, heading for Pravin’s United Nations Headquarters base, called UNHQ for short.

* * *

After several hours they arrived at UNHQ from the north, then circled it for a ceremonious entrance through the south gates. Deirdre stared out the window at the walls of the base; once they had looked grand and pale white, in the early years of the settlements, but now these same walls looked dirty and weak, completely unable to defend against the deadly new weapons developed in the settlements.

They arrived at the south gates, which were not really gates anymore but more of a ceremonial passage, and were waved through by Peacekeeper guards in their pale blue uniforms. Their convoy vehicles parked, and they climbed out to where a Peacekeeper officer welcomed them with handshakes.

Deirdre looked around while the formalities passed. The base still had its observation tower and some other notable buildings, plus its many long, narrow tunnels and small pressure domes. In fact, it hadn't changed much in seventy years and looked rattier quaint. There was a stagnation about it that reinforced what Deirdre saw in Pravin's own character.

The diplomatic escorts led them down some of these narrow hallways, through the glass-lined Planet Walk, and finally to a small reception room. Pravin did not come to greet them, nor were any of the other Council leaders sharing this particular room.

Deirdre sat and munched hybrid carrot sticks absently, chewing each bite well. As she ate she thought more about her visions from the empath chair, of what they meant, and how they could be understood.

* * *

The Council meeting came to order. Deirdre had taken her chair in the Council chamber, which had been built out of a section of the *Unity* after planetfall and hadn't been rebuilt since. The walls were a dull silver-gray, the seating in the audience was cramped, and video cameras recorded everything. In the center of the high ceiling gleamed a silver disc imprinted with the United Nations Space Agency seal, salvaged from the command center of the *Unity* itself.

Pravin rang down his gavel from his seat at the center of the curved table. As he made his customary opening remarks, Deirdre took stock of the others at the table.

Corazon Santiago sat on the far side of the table, her back perfectly straight and her face expressionless. Deirdre knew that she had four bases now, all of them well defended, in which she trained legions of soldiers. Some of the others had better technologies, but Santiago

and her Spartans were the truest warriors.

Next to her sat Prokhor Zakharov. The Russian scientist, leader of the University labs, had started as Pravin's chief scientist but had later set up his own network of holdings some distance to the southeast of UNHQ. He was old when the *Unity* mission started, and still looked old, thin and harsh, his own genetic treatments keeping him in a timeless but aged state. As she looked at him she caught him staring at her, and she thought he looked angry. She gave him a tentative nod, but he looked away.

Pravin, in the center, looked sluggish, far from the bright-eyed Idealist he had once been. Since his defeat in battle more than seventy years ago the other faction leaders had slowly stripped him of his powers and left him with only his title of Planetary Governor.

Next to him sat Director Morgan, dressed in immaculate robes of the highest-quality fabric, with tiny jewels glinting from here and there. His face was composed, but it was hard to miss the hint of a smug smile. His bases were the most advanced, and his citizens strutted like kings, because they lived the richest lives on Chiron. The only cost was the relentless quest for new resources to burn, and the deadly mindworm attacks that beset him constantly.

And that left her. No warriors to speak of, few luxuries, some science, a reasonably contented population, and a simple desire not to repeat the tragedies of Earth.

"You know what I bring to the table," said Morgan in his smooth, rich voice, shaking Deirdre from her reverie. "I have shared my production facilities freely, and have never hesitated to buy or sell goods needed at any base on Chiron. Now I have a need, for more land to mine, and I see no reason why I shouldn't be granted this land."

"But this buying and selling has always benefited you and your people, Director Morgan." Deirdre was surprised to see that Pravin Lal had set down his gavel and entered the debate with Morgan. "Surely you don't intend to use something that benefited you as a bargaining chip with us?"

"I produce what the people need, and what they ask for," said Morgan. "When you wanted these walls, I got you the raw materials, Pravin. When Santiago's warrior children clamored for sophisticated toy weapons and access to my advanced gaming networks, I gave them both. We have a fledgling economy here, based on a system of credits that I developed. I'm not asking for this land as a favor, but as an acknowledgment that what I do for the settlements is valuable and necessary."

Pravin nodded and lapsed into silence. Deirdre spoke up. "That land is adjacent to my territories. Those hillsides you want to mine are rich with trees I nurtured into an Earthlike ecosystem." Several of the others had leaned back in their chairs, and Morgan even stifled a yawn.

"We all have forests," said Zakharov. "Give me a hill, and I'll give you a forest. It's so simple. You can plant another one."

Deirdre shook her head. "No. This is more than a forest. It's a full ecosystem, growing and maintaining itself under its own power in native soil. If left to flourish it would grow to the far reaches of Chiron."

"So if your forest grows down into Peacekeeper territory, all by itself, it should take an act of Council to stop it from overrunning his bases?" asked Morgan.

Deirdre frowned. "No. But this is a first on Chiron, and a triumph as much as your energy banks. And it's not on anyone else's land, except the land that should be rightfully mine." She shook her head in exasperation and looked directly at Morgan. "It's a huge world. Why there?"

"Because it's most efficient, Deirdre," said Morgan, resting one broad black hand on the table. "There is no mining for hundreds of kilometers as rich as those very hillsides. But to your north are a thousand hills worth seeding. Burn through that xenofungus around your bases, and you can get a thousand more."

"The xenofungus is part of Chiron. If I burn it, we'll undergo mindworm attacks, just as you do."

“Will you?” That was the voice of Santiago, cracking into the debate like a whip. “You know more about Chiron’s native life than any of us, Deirdre. The mindworms and the xenofungus are a nuisance to us all, and you know something about them. More than Zakharov, even. So tell us, what would happen if you burned these fields?”

So they’ve broached the subject. Deirdre forced herself to calm down and choose her words carefully. “It’s just as I’ve told you. Destroy the balance of Chiron, and the worms come, like antibodies fighting an infection. Stop mining, and the worms will stop attacking.”

“I’d like more proof,” Zakharov said harshly. “All I see on file in the common datalinks are some summary papers and rudimentary charts. You know more, much more than you’re letting on.” His pale blue eyes flashed at her angrily, and Deirdre marveled at his venom.

Santiago spoke up. “Agreed. If you know ways to control these mindworms, tell us. It’s in the Settlement Conventions...you must share such crucial research data with all of us.”

“Really?” Deirdre was still staring at Zakharov. “Does Prokhor share the secrets of his genetic treatments?”

Zakharov snorted. “Your Gaian biolabs couldn’t produce the treatments, even if you knew how to make them. But I give them to you anyway. Where were you when mindworms attacked my Academy Park and shattered the minds of three of my finest scientists?” He looked at Pravin. “You know she must turn over the data. Any and all of it.”

Deirdre looked at the angry eyes of the other settlement leaders, feeling that things had gone way off course. Morgan sat back smugly, and Deirdre realized that the others were fighting his battle for him, leaving him with political capital to burn.

She thought again of the visions she had experienced, visions of a life so vast it would dwarf every ego at this table. If that force were turned against her, or put in Morgan’s hands, it could be used to destroy anything on Planet, or even turned against Planet itself.

“Well, Deirdre,” said Pravin quietly. “I’m afraid there are valid points here. What of your research data? It could save lives.”

“You’re *afraid*,” said Deirdre, echoing Pravin. “You know I’m in the best position to analyze my own research data.”

“With all due respect, you aren’t,” said Morgan. “Zakharov may be better equipped to analyze much of your data. I may be able to correlate attacks on my bases with your records, giving us more insight into why the worms act as they do.” He fixed her with a stare. “I have reached out to you, time and time again. I’ve offered you trade agreements, the sharing of expertise, my resources for your land. You’ve spumed my every advance. But in this matter, lives are at stake. If the planet is angry at us, as you suggest, we must find a way to work around it.”

“The way is to live with Planet, and not just on it,” said Deirdre, and her heart started to race. Looking around the room she saw details she hadn’t noticed before—the gold rims on Zakharov’s spectacles, the pale blue gem glimmering from the front of Pravin’s turban, and even the fine weave of Santiago’s uniform.

They’re not going to stop. We’re not going to stop. Only Planet can cleanse itself.

She took a deep breath. “This meeting was about territory, not my research data. It’s my data, it’s complex, and I don’t have a way to present it in a way you’d understand.” She shook her head. What logical reason could she give?

“I’m sorry to hear that, Deirdre,” said Pravin.

“The settlements thrive on a spirit of cooperation, Deirdre,” said Santiago. “My soldiers, Morgan’s luxuries, Zakharov’s technology, including the very genetic treatments that keep all of us alive. Are you saying you want to go it alone?”

The genetic treatments. Her eyes suddenly went to Simper, sitting in the audience chamber, and she realized how much Morgan would like to see someone like him leading the Gaians. If Morgan and Zakharov were working against her, they wouldn’t even have to kill

her. Just let her die...

She turned back to Santiago, seeing in the woman's cold face the same force of will that had allowed her to defeat Pravin in battle decades ago. *I wonder, does she know that I helped Pravin, that I commanded the mindworms that destroyed part of her army?* Deirdre suspected Corazon did know, and so kept her at a distance. Now the space between them felt wider than ever.

"I've fed you, Corazon, and given you key hybrids for your farms. My citizens and I simply choose not to drown ourselves in wasteful luxury. As for Zakharov..." She looked at him, and then at Pravin, "Life is our most precious possession. The Settlement Conventions are very clear, that the genetic treatments can't be refused to any of us. To cross that line..." She shook her head. "It's milder. It's completely unethical."

"Withholding your research data is unethical," said Zakharov. "The mindworms kill people."

Deirdre just shook her head. Pravin looked at her, then looked at the others, who waited expectantly. "Prokhor will send the treatments to Deirdre," said Lal. "The Conventions are very clear on that. As for the rest of it—Deirdre, you, must turn over all of your research data within seven days. If you don't, the disputed territory goes to Nwabudike Morgan."

"You don't look well, Deirdre," said Zakharov. "I hope I can assemble your treatments in time."

"Quiet," snapped Pravin, coming to life for a moment. He rang down his gavel, ending the Council.

Chapter Five

Chairman Yang watched the intercepted video feed of the settlement Council meeting in his strategy room. Behind him General Markos and the spymaster watched as well.

As Pravin's gavel rang down Yang nodded in approval; he changed the camera view to one of Deirdre Skye before pausing the video feed, freezing her in time. Her face looked dark with concern.

"Well, Chairman?" asked General Markos. "Is that what you wanted to see?"

Yang nodded, still studying Deirdre's face. "Yes. The Council has turned against Deirdre Skye, so we'll have a willing ally in the settlements."

"What if she isn't willing, Chairman?" asked the spymaster. "She doesn't even know we exist."

"That will change," said Yang. "She'll learn of us, and she'll welcome us. I consider this the beginning of a courtship." He looked at the spymaster "I'll be sending you a very important mission in the near future. Put your best Gaian operative on it."

The spymaster nodded, but Markos grimaced. "What about the rebels? We've surrounded Base Five, cut off their air supply, and stopped all food shipments, but they're still in there. When do we move?"

"It's nearly time," said Yang. He stared at Deirdre's face. "Assemble the shadow army in this base, near the entrance to the warrens."

* * *

Jin Long paced the perimeter of the inner shaft, Doc trailing him by a few steps. There were no lights in the base, since Yang had shut

down their power, and he could see small groups of rebels kneeling around the central shaft, trying to enjoy the half-light filtering down through the skylights above.

He glanced back to see Doc wiping his broad face with a swatch of fabric. His face still glistened with sweat above the pressure mask he now wore all the time, a necessity since Yang had crippled most of the ventilation system.

“The heat is getting oppressive, sir,” said Doc. He put his rag away and fingered his weapon, a refurbished penetrator from the shadow army’s ammo depot. “I now wish he would simply attack and get it over with.”

Jin nodded. “We should have anticipated a waiting game. I thought Yang would fly into a rage when we took this base, and counterattack immediately.”

“I thought the Chairman was known for making decisions based on logic rather than emotion, sir.”

Jin nodded. “True.” He prided himself on that quality as well, but the oppressive darkness and heat of the base were starting to cloud his thinking. He stopped and looked down into the shaft. “The citizens locked in the big rooms must not be warming to our cause.”

“They’re warming, all right, but not to our cause. It stinks in there, and they’re bitterly angry.”

“They’re the least of our concern now. Where to go, and when—that’s most important to us.” He looked at his quicklink, which was still inoperative. With the darkness and the lack of noise and air, he felt as if he lived in a tomb.

He looked at Doc. “Make another round of the mines. I’m still concerned that Yang will launch a surprise attack.”

Doc nodded and sighed. “Down I go.”

“Check it carefully. This place is riddled with secrets.”

Captain Adler of the Hive army sat in an impact rover and watched the low hills that covered the rebel Base Five. Under sketchy moonlight he could see the dark blobs of waiting soldiers curving away at intervals to his left and right, and he thought he could even make out the shape of another rover on the far side.

He stared ahead at the small valley where the Base Five central shaft was hidden. His muscles twitched as he thought of advancing on the shaft, filling it with fire, rappeling down into the base with his guns blazing. He grinned in spite of himself.

But the Chairman said wait, and so he waited. They did not question the will of the Chairman, and besides, the rumor was that some secret force was going to attack the base from below.

Which made what he now saw all the more puzzling.

He blinked. Running from the perimeter toward the shaft opening was the shadowy form of a soldier, rifle held high. The soldier sprinted at a rapid pace, completely alone.

Adler looked instinctively to his quicklink, but it was nonfunctional because of the jamming Yang was using on the rebels. He looked around and even lifted his weapon. Should he shoot the soldier? Were they supposed to attack?

One shot finally did ring out, and the running figure jerked a little as if hit in the leg, then continued to run with a limp. As Adler stared the running soldier breasted the hill that shielded the central shaft. Ten seconds later, there was the sound of gunfire and shattering glass.

* * *

The soldier who crashed through the skylight surprised the rebels as well, falling with fragments of glass down into the dark throat of Base Five. He didn't fire his weapon, but just fell like a stone, and no attack followed.

When Jin heard, he ran to the central shaft, listening as his rebel soldiers chattered uneasily in the darkness. Above he could see

where the soldier had shot a jagged hole in the skylights, and below him he could see nothing but darkness.

“Any activity outside?” he shouted. He heard his orders relayed until word came back—no other Hive soldiers had advanced.

He looked down into the shaft again as Ani appeared next to him, breathless. He spoke to her. “Doc is still down there, but with the links jammed he can’t tell us what’s going on.”

“There’s still no movement outside,” said Ani. “Was this a suicide?”

“I’m going down,” said Jin. “Stay here and monitor things.”

The body lay in the center of a halo of blood, a dark smudge even in Doc’s powerful glowlight.

Space yawned above and around them, pitch black, and Jin felt a chill.

They approached the body carefully. The helmet was shattered like an egg, and Doc pulled it off in pieces. The face underneath was pale and wide-eyed, the bones skewed by the force of the landing.

“He landed on his back,” said Doc.

Jin looked at the body, haunted by the dead eyes. “No rappelling equipment, and completely alone. It was like a suicide.” He looked more carefully. “Looks like they tried to vaporize his leg.”

“But if suicide, why this way?” Doc touched the man’s clothes, opening the outer jacket to reveal an ID tag. “Morris! I think that’s one of our sympathizers.”

Jin nodded, and they began to search his pockets. Finally Doc stopped and pulled out a small bundle wrapped in dark cloth. He handed it to Jin.

Jin took the bundle and unwrapped it, conscious again of the yawning space above them, like the eye of Chairman Yang himself, watching them. From the cloth one small object fell.

“A pendant,” said Doc. “Why?”

Jin touched the tiny wings of the two cranes intertwined on the pendant. He turned it over and examined the back. “Hana,” he said, staring at a tiny etching. He bit his lip and considered the name. “That was Akim’s wife.”

“The former Grand Advisor?”

Jin nodded as if hearing a truth. “Let’s get back up there.”

* * *

Back in their makeshift command center, Jin hunched over a battery-powered touchscreen with Doc, its soft light bathing their faces. The pendant had popped open after some manipulation, and now they quickly scanned the datachip inside.

“These are maps and plans of this base,” said Jin.

“But they’re dated before the base was actually built,” said Doc. “These are, more like blueprints, and far more detailed than the maps we got from the common datalinks.”

Jin nodded. “Have the system compare these maps to the ones we already have.”

“Should be easy,” said Doc. He punched up a series of commands, and the new, hidden areas on the datachip map glowed in silver. “Look, here are two of Yang’s sleeping chambers.”

“And there’s another passage behind the production lines that we didn’t know about.” Jin scanned down through the levels, going deeper and deeper into the mining levels of the base. “There’s a hidden passage, and there’s another. Short ones, though, just connecting various parts of the base.”

“Look,” said Doc. On the screen a long line glowed in silver, heading south from the base and into a tangle of tunnels. He scrolled the map to follow it, until it opened into a tangle of silver.

“The warrens,” Jin breathed. “A series of natural tunnels that

Chairman Yang occupied when he first arrived here. They've been shut off for years, but according to this they might connect this base to the Hive."

"Then Yang could use this tunnel to ambush us!"

Jin nodded. "Or we could use it to ambush him. He doesn't know that we have this map, so we can set up defenses in the tunnels. And with this level of detail we can find our way right through to his base."

"How do we know we can trust this map?"

"We can't, really. But Akim..." Jin stopped and reflected, remembering something in the former Grand Advisor's face the last time they had met. It had been right after Akim's wife had disappeared, part of one of the Chairman's antirebel activities. "I don't think he saw eye-to-eye with the Chairman. And with this pendant belonging to his wife..."

"Still, sir. It could be a trap."

"Even so, these tunnels are small and narrow, and they will provide our best chance of success in battle. They lead to Yang's home base, and I don't think he'd want us to know of them."

Doc thought a moment, then nodded. "We can certainly scout it out. I'll get Ani so we can coordinate the troops." He hurried off.

Jin stared down at the touchscreen, where the tunnels glowed in silver.

* * *

The spymaster entered the command center, a dark object clutched between two hands. Yang, sitting at the central table, looked up at him and then over to Mia, who was staring at readouts detailing the Hive army.

"Mia, it's going to get busy in here. Why don't you entertain yourself for a while? Perhaps you can go to the shore."

She looked up, then finally nodded. “If you’d like, Father.” She got up and smoothed her red tunic, then walked out of the room, brushing past the spymaster on her way out. Yang turned to the man, who shifted back and forth nervously.

“No one knows who the soldier is who went into the rebel base, Chairman.”

“It’s not important.” Yang pointed to the object in the man’s hands. “Is that what I think it is?”

The spymaster approached and set the battered portable touchscreen in front of Yang, who picked it up and turned it in his hands. “Does he know it’s gone?”

“Of course not.”

“And has anything been transferred off it?”

“A series of maps were transferred off the touchpanel, perhaps into another touchpanel or a data-chip.” The spymaster smiled unpleasantly.

Yang nodded. “Good.” He handed the touchpanel back to the spymaster. “Put it back. We’re ready to move on the rebels.”

* * *

Jin stood with Doc in the rear of the narrow cave that led to the secret tunnel. Several rebels hauled the last of the rocks away that had covered the door, and Jin blinked the floating dust out of his eyes. Portable glowlamps cast jagged shadows along the rocks as they illuminated the pitted metal surface of the door.

“It could be guarded inside,” said Doc.

“Probably, but Yang doesn’t know we’ve found the tunnel.” Both of them kept their voices low in the uneven darkness. “Plus we have three hundred armed rebels behind us.”

Ani appeared behind them. “We’re about lined up,” she said. Jin walked back and looked out into the open space of a large cave,

beyond which stretched a rocky tunnel that led to the central shaft. In the darkness stood clumps of rebel soldiers, each clump illuminated with several glowlights. It looked as if three hundred stars had fallen into the earth.

“Does everyone know their orders?”

Ani nodded. “We blow the door, and the scouts go in first. If it looks safe we follow in groups, as fast as we can go, and set up at our chokepoints. If there’s fighting, we’ll take the tunnels in sections, setting up command points at each division.”

Jin nodded and turned to Doc. “Blow the door.”

* * *

Akim sat in his quarters in the Hive, his fingers wound tightly in his robes. His door was closed, but it had no lock, since the Chairman believed that locks opened the mind to temptation and weakened the spirit of the people. So Akim sat in the small room in his simple wooden chair, facing the door.

Wondering if it would burst open at any moment, the shadows of the hiveguard eclipsing the lights outside.

His eyes wandered to a digital frame on the wall, where images of the Chairman cycled at five-minute intervals. There had been a time, years ago, when that frame had cycled personal images of Akim’s life: his graduation from Yang’s martial arts school, his ceremony of promotion to Grand Advisor with his shy, smiling wife in the background, his early companions fresh from a game of tunnelball.

All of the people in the photos were long gone, victims of age, fate, or, for most of them, Chairman Yang’s increasingly brutal policies.

How had he, a Grand Advisor, stood by while his own wife was taken by the guard? How had he looked away, making sure he was on duty in another base when he knew, in his heart, the day it would happen?

Because Chairman Yang controlled my spirit, too, just like the rest of the

citizens. I'm no stronger than them. I just made sure that my own ambitions mirrored the Chairman's.

He looked at the digital feed again. Now it was all Chairman Yang, all day long, and Akim's personal images had been deleted from the central datalinks.

A wave of long-buried hate turned his stomach, and he realized then that it was a hate directed against himself, not the Chairman.

The end of his life was coming, all of the power and security fading away to the final nothingness. And now, more than ever, he wished for that shy, smiling woman to share his bed and talk about times past.

A soft knock sounded at his door. Akim tensed, and then forced himself to relax and accept whatever lay outside the door. "Come in," he said.

The door opened, and there stood Mia, smiling at him. "I'm going to the beach, old man," she said. "Would you like to come?"

Akim thought, and then he nodded.

* * *

Akim picked his way across the rocky beach, keeping a cloak wrapped about him. The suns felt too hot today, and he had his hood up to shield him, and he kept having to remind himself that this may be the last time he ever saw the ocean, or the sky.

Mia was aggravating him. She had taken off her outer robes and hiked up her sleeveless red undertunic to mid-thigh, and now she ran ahead of him, splashing in the water. She seemed unusually boisterous, and both he and the two hiveguard escorts had to hurry to keep up with her.

Besides, he had heard about the suicide at Base Five, and wondered if it had anything to do with the maps he had transferred. It disturbed him to know so little about what was happening.

He looked around for Mia again, only to find that she had run out

into the surf until he lost her shape against the sun. Then suddenly she appeared again, smiling through her translucent pressure mask. She turned and walked backward, catching her breath.

He noticed a tattoo of a slender dragon that coiled around her right arm, and it surprised him.

“I do love it here,” she said.

“You should calm down, Mia. It isn’t becoming for a daughter of the Chairman to behave this way.”

She shrugged. “As daughter of the Chairman I should enjoy the freedom others lack, don’t you think?” She arched one eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not my place to wonder,” he said. She slowed her pace for a moment, staring at him. Then she smiled.

“My father says you can read people like a book, Akim.”

“Your father flatters me unnecessarily, Mia. Now put your robes back on and walk with me.”

“They’re too hot.” She continued to stare at him over her mask, still walking backward. “He says that you would be a difficult person to have as an enemy. He thinks you’re dangerous. I know you play games well, but otherwise I don’t see it.”

He glanced at her, mopping his brow with a woven cloth. He couldn’t take the heat of the sun on his bare skin, and couldn’t take the heat of the sun wrapped in his robes. But old age was about living with discomfort. “Your father is toying with you, Mia. What could an old man like me do to anyone, much less someone like your father?”

“Exactly.” She smiled at him, then frowned as he ignored her. “Do you think he’s afraid of you?” He shrugged. “He’s not afraid of anyone, I would think.”

“But if he were afraid of someone, it would be Jin Long, right?” Now she walked beside him, looking at him as if reading a

touchscreen set at its smallest font size.

“I don’t know, Mia. Now put your robes on and let’s get back to the base. It’s too hot out here for an old man.”

“We can stay out here for as long as I want, Akim.” She stroked her arm lightly, where the dragon tattoo coiled. “And you’re only here because my father sees some use for you.”

For some reason, this sent a chill down Akim’s spine. It was a chill he had learned to recognize—he had just heard the truth, but didn’t yet know why it was the truth.

Mia now looked back at the water, stretching her arms over her head. The hiveguard walked parallel to them, uncomplaining in their heavy black armor.

My father sees some use for you...

Had he played into Chairman Yang’s hands? It seemed suddenly of great importance that he had been sent away right before the attack against the rebels might be occurring. And now that the rebels were under attack, he was of no more use to the Hive.

If I return to the base, Yang will kill me. But what did I expect?

His eyes swiveled to the sea, and from there to the north, where Base Five waited somewhere in the distance, surrounded by Hive soldiers.

A glint of light on a small bluff caught his attention. That was probably Seawatch, one of Yang’s “spiritual retreat houses” that overlooked the sea. At the sight of that glint of light, Akim’s heart quickened.

“You’re going back to the base,” he said to Mia, and turned, signaling the hiveguard. “Go with them now.”

Mia’s mouth dropped open. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I’m staying out here to walk.” His hand slipped around her waist, and her eyes widened as he guided her firmly back in the direction

of the parked rover.

“What are you doing?” She jerked away from him so violently that they both stumbled and landed in the sand, his feeble arms tangling with her slender legs. She backed away, dusting off her red tunic and glaring at him as he climbed slowly to his feet.

“Go back to the base, Mia.” He fought for breath, sweltering in his robes. “Just go.”

She stared at him, her face flushed, and then suddenly she smiled. “It’s a game, isn’t it?”

The hiveguard approached, and Akim waved them toward her. Slowly Mia gathered herself and headed back toward the rover with her two escorts.

Somewhere beneath the ground, Chairman Yang’s shadow army gathered in dark tunnels, awaiting the rebel force.

* * *

Moments after Doc blew open the tunnel to the warrens, the skylights at the top of the base shattered, and metal spheres fell into the central shaft Jin could hear them, falling hundreds of meters past this level to crack into the stone at the bottom of the shaft, and he ran to see them.

Ani rushed with him, past their grouped rebel soldiers, who looked around uneasily. Jin shined his glowlamp down the tunnel, which sloped toward a railing that overlooked the central shaft. He got to the railing and shined his light down to the bottom, but it was too far to see.

“It must be explosives,” he said. “Let’s get into the tunnels.”

Something exploded in the tunnel, and he could hear several objects firing back up from the bottom of the shaft. He looked down to see a dark sphere sail up from the depths and burst open, sending a massive wave of fire in every direction. Jin turned and ran, feeling a gust of heat at his back. More explosions burst at every level, above and below.

“Into the tunnels!” shouted Ani. “Get away from the central shaft!”

Jin turned his light back and saw a cloud of thick red fog boiling up in the shaft and rolling in their direction, enveloping the rear echelons of his soldiers. He could hear choked cries, and then the sound of another explosion rocked the tunnels.

Jin pushed through the rebels, who had started to bunch up at the end of the cave. Ani shouted at them, kicking viciously to get them to move aside. Finally they got through to Doc, who guided the rebels in groups into the tunnel that led to the warrens. His face was covered in sweat, and Jin felt a new wave of desperate fear overtake the mass of soldiers.

“It’s some kind of attack,” said Jin. “Gas, fire, and probably acid and poison, rising up from the central shaft.”

“Not very subtle,” said Doc, pushing more rebels into the tunnel. “Does he know where we are?”

“He may, but he certainly doesn’t know how many, or how well armed. Let’s push forward.”

“It’s a two-kilometer jog to the warrens themselves,” said Doc. “If we make it there, we should be fine.”

“Make it a run, then,” said Jin.

* * *

Mia entered the command room, her hair damp from a shower and piled up on her head. She walked quietly, unwilling to disturb her father and thus cause him to send her away.

He sat at the tac table in the center of the room, where markers showed the progress of the battle. He had his eyes closed as if in deep meditation, but when her foot scuffed just slightly his eyes flickered open.

“Mia,” he said. “Are you back so soon?”

“Akim sent me back, Father. He seemed kind of anxious.” She

looked at the markers. "How goes the battle?"

"Our runners have said that the rebels are heading into the warrens, and the shadow army is massed in the long tunnel to their west. It's good, but we won't know for certain until it's over."

"Of course."

Yang looked at her as she stared at the table, absorbing the positions of the rebel and Hive units. "You've grown up, Mia. You aren't the little girl who used to run the tunnels, chasing Akim with a toy plasma gun."

She smiled. "I remember that! He was easily caught."

"Perhaps he let you catch him," said Yang. He stood up. "I didn't realize you were going to the shore with Akim."

She nodded. "The old man entertains me, Father. But he's not as challenging as he used to be."

"He's gotten old. In his youth he would have been more than your match, I think." He shook his head. "If a traitor does exactly what you want him to do, he's still a traitor, Mia."

"Of course!"

Yang nodded. "Of course."

Her eyes flared. "So do it."

Yang took a long look at his daughter. She had matured, her face beautiful but with hard lines emphasized by her high cheekbones. Yang suspected that she would kill Akim herself, if he asked her to.

"Where is he now?" Yang asked.

"He stayed at the shore, Father, but I don't know why."

"Interesting." Yang wondered. Most likely, he had stayed out of fear, realizing that he would be killed this very day. But he was cunning, and not really afraid to die, and so Yang considered other

possibilities. “Go back to the safe room, Mia. We’ll talk later, and I can show you the progress of the battle.”

She nodded and left, while Yang summoned General Markos.

* * *

Akim scrambled up the rocky bluff, his weak ankles turning on the stones. He finally reached the top, and looked around, brushing sand from his robes.

Set in the stone was a small door of pitted metal.

He walked to the door and found a small metal socket in the rock, where a Hive seal could be used as a universal key. His own seal had been taken by Yang, so now he couldn’t open this door.

But from his robes he pulled a small translucent stone. It was smaller than his had been, with fewer facets, and a tiny jade dragon coiled inside with ruby eyes. It was Mia’s seal, which she always hooked in her belt at the beach, fearing the chain would give her a tan line if she left it around her neck. It spoke of an odd vanity, but today it had worked to his advantage.

He pushed the stone into the socket, and after a moment the door slid back.

Seawatch was a small, multilevel retreat house built into the rocks over the shore. Long windows along one wall allowed a view of the sea, and sunlight fell across simple, sturdy furniture that had been covered in white cloth until Yang decided to visit the house again.

Akim closed the door and hurried through the house, down to the lowest level where a narrow dining room connected to kitchen facilities. At the back of the kitchen was a small door set into the rock.

Only a seal such as the one he had taken from Mia would open this door. He used it again, and the door opened, revealing a narrow, rocky tunnel that led down into the darkness, and eventually, he knew, to the warrens.

Akim put on his pressure mask and passed through the door. It closed behind him, shutting him off from the surface and back into the underground.

* * *

He went down the long sloping tunnel and into the east end of the warrens. Everything was silent, and he moved cautiously forward, the small glowlamp he carried stabbing the darkness.

He turned left and right in the narrow, rocky tunnels, thinking he would make his way toward the rebel Base Five, but without his map he was getting hopelessly lost. He crossed through tall rooms that held large generators on spindly legs, and other rooms with long wooden troughs, now moldy, where food had once grown. Everything was silent, and he wondered if the attack had started.

Finally he stopped in a narrow rectangular room and sat on dirty plastic stool. He rested a moment, catching his breath, and while resting he heard a trickling sound, like water on stone. He looked at the walls of the room and noticed that they were damp.

He stood up, curiosity dispelling his fatigue. He went through a low door, and then through two more rooms, and finally found himself in a wide corridor, heading back east. He hurried along it, and then the tunnel opened up and faint sunlight creeping through slits in the ceiling above illuminated a large, high-ceilinged cave.

At the other end of the cave dark water lapped at a stone edge. And floating in that water was a black metal ship, a transport foil, simple of design and somewhat the worse for wear.

He walked toward the ship, and when he reached it he put his hand on the side. It felt cold and rough, but it was real.

This was the ship that he and the Chairman had used to cross the sea from the settlements. He shook his head, staring at the ship and remembering that perilous journey, their stoic citizens crammed into the holds belowdeck.

Even at that time there had been discontent, angry citizens stirring

up sentiment against the Chairman. It had been Akim's idea to tie the worst offenders together in pairs, back to back, and then throw them into the water to see how long they could last. Invariably they would thrash against each other, each one trying to remain above the surface, and both would drown. He and Yang would show the other citizens how these rebel dogs were interested only in themselves, and had no honor.

He had been young and brash. Now the memory made him shudder, and he thought of Jin again. He turned back, and just then he heard something scuffling in the tunnel.

From the far end of the room several figures approached. He swept his tiny light, trying to make them out, but he could see little but shadows as they closed in, and then he saw the glint of knives, reaching out for him.

In the distance, the first sounds of fighting erupted as the Hive soldiers met the rebels beneath Chiron.

* * *

Jin Long moved very carefully down a dark hallway. Flashes of white and blue light from side tunnels up ahead sent shadows jolting along the wall and forced him to focus on every step. Behind him he marked the wall with a thin queue, a series of phosphorescent markers that would allow his subordinates to follow him.

A blast shook the tunnel ahead. He heard the slightest scuffle behind him and melted into the shadows so carefully that Ani in her blue-black uniform hurried right past him.

He took two swift steps and caught her, covering her mouth as she turned in shock. When she saw him she relaxed and backed up, almost laughing with release of tension.

"I thought you were the demon Yang himself for a moment," she said. "Forgive me."

"What's your report?"

“We hold two main positions, F4 and H6, but Yang’s soldiers keep coming at us from the west instead of the north. They’re coming through cross tunnels and pinning us down. They’re strange soldiers—some fight well, and others walk right into our shots, but they seem to always have a positional advantage.”

“We need to find out where they’re coming from. If there’s some kind of gathering point to the west...” He trailed off, chilled to the bone. He reached out to grip her arm, hard.

“We must focus. Try to gather our troops in large knots, and resist from all sides. If they’re coming from the west, we need to push south, and try to make it to the Hive.” Suddenly it was all clear; tactically, as he thought over the battle, it made the most sense. Yang had access from the west, and he had the force of numbers. Yang expected them. A simple trap Jin could handle, but this was worse: he had no idea where the enemy was coming from.

“Gather the leaders in the vent room at 4C. We have to change plans. If we keep going this way, Yang will kill us.”

“What will we do?”

“I don’t know. Something different, anything. But we must change tactics, or we all die.”

She looked at him one more time, and hurried off.

* * *

Jin ran through the dark tunnels, trying to keep the sound of fighting and the heavy boots of Hive soldiers in the distance. Now he passed a room with puddles of melted flesh and metal, and knew these were rebel victims of Hive attacks, and in another room he saw three charred bodies entangled on the ground, overwhelmed by a flank attack.

He circled back toward 4C, trying to round up any rebel stragglers. A scuffling sound alerted him as two figures emerged from the darkness, shadows throwing fire, and he whirled, firing back at them. The smaller one fell, but the other came at him, a heavy, slow

man, catching him with a powerful swing. Jin stumbled sideways, heart pumping with adrenaline, and then came back at the enemy soldier, swinging hard. He felt rage power his limbs as he beat the man's defenses aside and landed blows on his face.

Finally the big warrior toppled, and Jin slipped in a pool of blood, falling with him. There was a crack and silence, and he lay on the floor, breathing heavily as his muscles twitched from the adrenaline rush.

He looked around. He lay in a pool of blood, from the two enemies and maybe from a previous rebel attack. His perspective was all wrong here—in this position he looked across the dark pool of blood, where the thick face of Yang's soldier lay with mouth askew, a glowlamp from somewhere beyond throwing shadows on the walls. From the dull look he knew the man was dead.

He stood up. The first warrior he had shot was dead, blood running from a chest wound, but he seemed a typical Hive officer, with a lean build and stern features. The second one, the bigger one, looked dull and coarse, like a mining drone.

Jin started at a jog toward 4C, reflecting on the decay of standards in the Hive army. The early Hive soldiers had honor and trained hard for a cause, he knew, whereas the thick man he had just defeated was more like a walking slab of meat. But those old warriors were from long ago.

Long ago...

The ship.

He saw it in his mind, as clear as that man's heavy face in the dark pool of blood. The original transport ship, the ship that had carried Yang and the original Hive crew across the waters. That ship still existed, he knew, but he had never seen it at any of the ports off the eastern shore.

Which means it's somewhere underground...

He hurried his pace and soon burst into room 4C, where Ani and Doc and a dozen rebels waited, wide-eyed. The tunnel smelled of stale air and death. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We'll never make it to the Hive," said Ani. "And we won't make it back to Base Five, either. They've cut us off from that damn tunnel."

"There's another way, I think," said Jin. He pulled out a touchscreen and activated the map. "The transport ship. The one they first used to cross from the settlements to this shore. It has to be down here."

"Where?" asked Doc, touching a gash on his face. "With that ship we could get away from here, go up the coast and start again." The rebels around Jin began to chatter as more flowed in, dirty and disorganized.

Jin stared at the touchpanel. "Here. This big room, near the eastern edge. It could be a harbor."

Doc leaned over. "It makes sense. And it's away from the bulk of the fighting. We could make it if we pushed."

Jin looked at all the rebels. "We're going for the transport, then. Get the scouts to clear our path, and spread the word. This is our only chance."

Jin, Doc, and Ani set off at a run, the rebel forces behind them.

* * *

They ran down narrow tunnels, past the sound of gunfire and flashes of light. As they ran the group of rebels swelled behind them, some staying behind to block the tunnels from Hive soldiers while the others ran forward like a crashing wave. Finally they passed through a series of small rooms, and then the tunnel widened, and Jin saw dampness on the wall.

"It's here," said Doc, gasping. Jin felt his legs burn from effort as he ran up the wide, sloping tunnel. Around and behind him his rebels ran, and he could hear their gasps and their footsteps, and the

shouts of encouragement to each other. Up ahead of him he saw the first rays of dim sunlight, and sea water glistening on the tunnel walls. He felt his heart lift, and felt Ani's small hand clutch his.

"The ship. I see it!" she shouted. More shouts rang out, and even the impact rounds that chased their heels seemed far away for that moment.

The tunnel opened into a large, cavelike room with gray metal walls on the side. The ceiling was high and the room almost forty meters across. There was nothing in the room, but on the other side black water touched a stone landing, and there floated a transport foil, rough and black.

"We made it!" said Ani, and he felt her tense for a final run. It was then that he noticed the dark smear on the ground near the ship, gleaming in the dim light.

"Stop!" Jin shouted, pulling Ani back. Dozens of rebel soldiers still rushed past, some of them discharging their weapons into the ceiling. Ani looked back at him, puzzled, still tugging at his wrist. "There's blood on the ground. Fresh blood, right there..." Ani still looked confused, but Jin started shouting. "Stop, everyone! Turn back!" He pulled at Ani. "Let's go! We have to..."

The metal walls at the sides of the room toppled forward, revealing rows of stiff-backed soldiers in gray uniforms. They lifted their weapons, compact energy rifles, and opened fire, filling the dark, boxy room with bursts of blue and white fire.

"Turn back!" Jin shouted. He began running back against the tide of rebels, pulling Ani behind him. "It's a trap! Assemble two rooms back!"

Behind him he could feel heat and hear the whining bursts of energy fire. He could hear the sounds of screaming rebels, and he could feel the bodies press around him as the rebels still advancing met the rebels in frantic retreat. He and Ani found themselves in the human tangle.

He glanced back to see Yang's warriors moving in lockstep into the

chaos. Bolts of fire from rebel guns ricocheted off the ceiling and hit churning knots of melee. Yang's soldiers shuddered when hit, but they didn't fall easily.

He saw one grab a rebel soldier and turn the man's neck, snapping it like a twig, then move on to the next as if working an assembly line. Another rebel grabbed him, and the Hive soldier swung a clumsy elbow, breaking the rebel's nose and sending her reeling.

The rebels, coming and going, began to choke the hallway, and he felt the stifling heat. He could hear gunfire from both directions, when suddenly Doc appeared next to him.

"We've got to get you out of here, sir," he said. He started pushing against the rebels. Jin felt a shudder as a long metal shaft of some kind penetrated three men in front of him.

"They're ahead and behind us," he said.

"Sideways, then," said Doc. He pulled Jin, and Jin pulled Ani, and then they were in a dark corner of the room.

In the center of the room the rebels lay like broken debris, thick on the ground, as the Hive soldiers waded methodically through them. He saw his people lying in their own blood, trying to drag themselves away, and being shot on the spot. About twenty of the Hive soldiers now turned to the rebels choking the tunnel. More barbed shafts flew in that direction, skewering several rebels at a time.

"This way," said Doc. He grabbed several rebels and used them as a shield, pushing Jin into the middle. They ran up the side of the room, around the chaos, hugging the shadows. A rebel soldier burst into flame next to him and fell, and Jin felt the heat of the blast scorch his forearm. He shouted in pain.

They were heading not for the ship but for that black, inky water. Their movement drew attention, and the Hive soldiers slowly began to fire on them. One of the great shafts whistled by Jin's head and buried itself in the stone.

“Go!” shouted Doc.

Jin focused on the water, only the water, as he ran. He heard Ani cry out, and looked back.

The Hive soldiers were pinning still-living rebels on the ground. He could hear the methodic chunks of nerve staples. Then he leaped, and felt Ani’s hand again as she leaped, and then the black waters engulfed him, shocking him with their icy coldness.

There was a tug, a strong current, and he let it take him. Black water was all around him, and bodies. He kicked out of his robes and started swimming, as the water churned around him.

* * *

Chairman Yang sat at his tactical table and watched the video feeds from the battle. He nodded.

“They’re not bright, but they’re effective,” he said.

General Markos had leaned into the touchscreens until his eyes were almost resting on the surface. “Not bad for a bunch of grafted halfwits.”

“It will get better,” said Yang. “Eventually the cloning experiments will bear fruit, and we can breed these by the thousands. But for now, these will do.”

Markos finally nodded. “If each squad is directed by a few of your own loyal hiveguard, it could work.” He crossed his arms. “With these shadow troops we’ve doubled the size of our army.”

“And every rebel is a shadowguard in waiting. The more we catch and graft, the bigger the army gets.” Yang stared at the touchscreen as the shadowy forms bent over writhing rebels and moved nerve staplers over their bodies.

“Do they have to do that on the field?” asked Markos, crossing his arms.

“It’s time,” said Yang. “Call the spymaster and tell him to trigger

the message to the Gaians. It's time to cross the sea."

Later that night

"When will you be going in for more of the treatments, Father?"

Yang stared at the ceiling in his sleeping chamber, trying to calm himself after the excitement of the day. Her question caught him off guard.

"Not in the near future, Mia."

"I ask because during those times you allow me to sit in on the Council meetings in your place, I find the experience very stimulating."

"I'm glad, Mia, but I told you that I won't be using the treatments for some time."

There was a silence during which he could almost hear the wheels turning in the darkness. "It's been six years, Father. And General Markos told me that your training hasn't been very rigorous lately. Are there no more treatments to steal?"

"There are treatments to steal, Mia. We know that Prokhor Zakharov has developed a powerful new genetic treatment that is better, and less invasive, than the previous series."

It took her only a moment to put two and two together. "But I was flirting with the spymaster, Father, and he told me that Zakharov has gotten suspicious, and cut off our access to his labs."

"He has." Yang started imagining what he was going to do to the spymaster tomorrow.

"So how will you acquire the technology, Father? Surely you have a plan."

"I do. In fact, I've sent a message across the sea this very day."

More wheels turning, and then he could almost feel the flash of intuition from her. “Will I be seeing the lands across the sea in the near future, Father? I’d really like to meet Director Morgan, and Corazon Santiago. I’ve seen her in the spy videos. She’s really fierce.”

“Hush, Mia. It’s not good for you to think about the future so much.”

Chapter Six

Skyfarms were another of Deirdre's farming innovations. Great structures of metal and glass more than a kilometer long, they soared above the Chiron cloud layer, following the suns for optimal exposure to the jungle of crops that grew inside. Manned by only a dozen crew, they could remain aloft for months, depositing their rich harvests to bases in need.

When Skyfarm Seven exploded, it burst like a star in the sky. Fragments of glass flew outward in every direction and rained down on the Chiron soil, while burnt plant matter, and burnt human flesh, tumbled through the sky to the ground. The explosion came swiftly, but the sky rained glass for almost a full minute.

* * *

At the time of the explosion, Deirdre was resting in her chambers, staring out at the fields of xenofungus. She had gone into isolation immediately after returning from the Council meeting, ordering Goldman and Simper to hold their ground on the disputed hillsides.

On a small touchscreen she scanned through the Council proceedings with fingers that had stiffened during the cold night journey back from UNHQ. Morgan wanted her land, Pravin was too weak to defend her, and they all wanted her research data. And Zakharov had watched her with a venom she couldn't understand, and seemed willing to take her very life by withholding his genetic treatments.

My very life. Are the secrets of Planet worth that?

The more she considered her options, the more she felt those secrets were worth almost anything she could imagine. She could see no other way to protect the world she had adopted except to resist with all her strength, and hope and pray she could marshal the forces of Planet in time. If not, she would need a miracle.

The beeping of her quicklink shook her out of her reverie, and her heart sank as she read the message: *Priority One Msg. Skyfarm destroyed. Gather in command center.*

She hurried off, pulling one of her simple wraps around her as she ran. When she reached the command center, the Gaians were buzzing.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“One of the skyfarms, Skyfarm Seven, exploded over the shore to the west,” said Goldman. “The datafeeds indicate it was completely destroyed, with all crew dead.”

“Are there any ground patrols near there?”

“There’s one about eight kilometers away. It’s heading there at top speed,” said Goldman. He slammed his fist into the side of the tactical table. “There were a dozen crew on that farm.”

“Are we sure that it’s completely destroyed?” asked Simper. He looked more pale than usual, and huddled into his wrap.

“You’ve seen the datafeeds,” snapped Goldman. “Something blew in the engine compartment, and shattered the whole damn thing. It’s gone.” He cursed. “They couldn’t have waited for the Council to resolve this. They had to send us a message.”

“Is this a message, Simper?” Deirdre stared at him.

“I can’t believe that,” said Simper. “What would Morgan have to gain?”

Goldman jabbed a finger at him. “Get it through your pale white skull. He doesn’t want the land, he wants our research data. Are you too blind to see that?”

“I’m not too blind to need proof,” said Simper, drawing back.

“We do need proof, and quickly,” said Deirdre. “If we can find proof of sabotage, we may get some sympathy from the Council.” Goldman just shook his head, staring at the readouts on the tactical

display. “Send all of our best investigators,” she continued. “I want them to go over the crash site like a glowmite on a xenobloom. Move!”

She stared at one of the camera feeds, which showed the explosion on a loop, with glass panels engulfed in fire and then vanishing to static, over and over again.

* * *

Later that night, as Centauri A slipped below the horizon and Centauri B continued to wash the landscape with its soft, orange-yellow light, Deirdre left the command center and headed up to an observation room. The weight of command rested heavily on her shoulders as she prepared to inform the families of the skyfarm crew about the disaster.

In the observation room she stood at the windows and watched the yellows and reds blend on the solemn, barren landscape. A tongue of xenofungus nearly touched the base of this tower, and as soon as she looked at the fungus, at its mounds of crimson tubules, she thought again of the planet force, whatever it was. At any spare moment now it pulled her into a reverie, as she tried to make sense of the strange patterns she saw in the empath chair during her daily visits.

“Lady Skye.” It was Goldman’s voice, and when she finally turned he stood there, waiting for her. He looked strange in the half-twilight, with the yellow-gold light on his face and hair.

“What is it?”

“With only six days left until the Council’s ultimatum, I wanted to know your thinking. Will you give in to them, or should I prepare?”

“There’s not much you can do, right?” She motioned to the world outside. “Perhaps we should turn our scientists into camera crews, and capture as much of this lovely world as we can before it’s laid to metallic waste.”

He took this as an invitation to step up to the window next to her.

“Do you really believe that, Lady? We’ve only explored parts of this single continent. There’s a lot of land out there.”

“You, too?” She shook her head. “Our future is an extension of the beliefs we hold now, correct? With Morgan’s way of thinking, it’s inevitable that Chiron will become a second Earth, even if it takes ten thousand years.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “I’m with you, Lady. Give me a thermal bag and the star-speckled night. But most of these people *wanted* a new Earth. Wasn’t that the idea behind the *Unity*?”

“It wasn’t my idea. If so, I never would have made the trip. I would rather have died, tending my hybrids on Earth. What brought me here was the promise of a new, untouched world.”

Goldman shifted closer to her, and lowered his voice as they watched the semi-twilight. “Then you won’t consider turning over the research data under any circumstances?”

She looked straight at him. “I won’t turn it over. There are things in those datatapes that even you don’t know about. It would allow Morgan to turn the mindworms against each other, or to scout our territories with the locusts, or cause the xenofields to consume themselves.” She sighed. “I’ve done as much as I can to protect this world, Goldman, and in many ways I’ve failed. But turning over that data would be the ultimate betrayal. If I’m to die—” She stopped for a moment, feeling her throat close. “I’d prefer to know that Morgan will have to fight Planet on its own terms.”

Goldman remained quiet, digesting her words before speaking. “How are your investigations into the native life? Will we be able to coordinate the attacks of the mindworms better than in the past?”

“Maybe. I hope to know soon.”

He nodded. “It could be the key to victory. But the control of mindworm boils is not my expertise.”

“You’ll manage.” She touched his arm, which was corded with muscle. She knew he swam every day in the pools in the recreation

commons, beating back the demons of age in his own way, trying to make his precious half-treatments last. “I want you to do something tonight.”

He nodded.

“I want you to copy all of the secret research data onto datacards and lock them away. Then we’re going to erase all of that data from the datalinks. Every trace of it”

“If anything happens to those datacards, the data will be lost forever.”

“That’s why I’m trusting you with them. I think...” She turned to look out over the xenofields, where somewhere to the west a skyfarm lay in glittering fragments near the shore. Her heart started a sudden, fluttering beat, and she touched her chest “I think a war is coming.”

“I’ll do what you’ve asked.”

“Good.” They stood for a moment in silence, watching the sky and the barren land.

* * *

After her meeting with Goldman, Deirdre went to a private office and activated the touchpanel, thinking that she would contact Pravin.

But what will I say?

She knew what the Council wanted, and she knew that she couldn’t give it to them. She was also certain that Pravin had heard about the skyfarm incident by now, but she saw no messages from him. She felt a sudden despair.

She turned off the touchpanel and headed for the command center, but instead found herself on a small metal elevator going down to the laboratory levels. She called Sylvie to meet her, who seemed surprised to see her during the current crisis.

"I want another session in the empath chair," said Deirdre.

Sylvie looked confused, but nodded. "We can do that, I guess." She shook her head a little. "Follow me, Lady."

* * *

This time Deirdre entered the trance state much more easily than before. Once there, she settled into the world, studying the strange patterns of light and experiencing random sensations.

Smells of fire, of soap, the suffocating plastic smell of the early pressure masks. Feelings of warmth, of icy, shooting pain, of something like fingers brushing along her forearms. Sounds of thunder, of human laughter strangely muffled.

It's trying to learn my vocabulary.

The realization struck her suddenly, as a great intuitive leap. With each sensation she experienced, the pattern, the presence, watched her. And knowing that, she began to help it, by feeding it her thoughts.

A stabbing pain in her stomach she reinforced with the simple thought-image of a mindworm coiling under a flame gun. She focused on that image, trying to see it and feel it and become it, teaching the presence about human pain. The Planet presence seemed to seize on that, ramping up the pain in her belly until she felt as if rusty wire were being pulled through her insides.

Pain. Pain. Bad. She focused all her being on one clear thought, ignoring the screaming agony, and then suddenly the pain vanished, and peace washed over her.

It learned.

There was a moment when she felt as if she were floating in an empty void, with no sensory input whatsoever.

And then the blackness opened up, and the patterns returned, and this time she could see the vast world beyond them. Every pattern of light she saw and every sensation she felt were connected to

others, and to others beyond that, almost to infinity. Before she had seen the smallest synapse in a vast interwoven mind-being, and now she saw it all.

It was as if the frog, living its whole life in a well, had been lifted forth and thrown into the ocean. Bright colors washed over her, and waves of feeling, and she felt something too big to be joy as she fainted and the planetmind left her.

* * *

“Lady Skye.”

The voice sounded human, and distant. Deirdre pushed her way through layers of gauzy darkness until she could finally open her eyes. Sylvie stood over her, a look of pinched concern on her face.

“It’s all right, Sylvie. Everything is wonderful.”

“Wonderful?” Sylvie looked as if she couldn’t process the word. Lady Deirdre became aware that she was on the floor, and that the hypnotist was frantically massaging her feet for some reason.

She sat up. “What happened?”

“You blacked out” Sylvie put her hand on Deirdre’s arm, and the hypnotist slunk back into the shadows. “Lady, I...”

“Before you say more, you should know that I did it. I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“The world. The mind. I saw the patterns that make up the world, in their entirety.” She shook her head, aware that she was smiling like a lovestruck schoolgirl. “This is the breakthrough we’ve been looking for, Sylvie. I spoke to it.”

Sylvie shifted back now, looking at Deirdre in concern. “Please tell me what you mean, Lady.”

“Get me a glass of water, and I’ll tell you.” She swallowed, aware now that her throat felt parched and her head ached. “I want to get

back in there as quickly as possible.”

Sylvie looked at her, and her eyes widened. She reached for Deirdre’s face. “What?” Deirdre asked. Something about Sylvie’s expression made her edgy.

“Your face, Lady Skye.” She looked down. “And your hands.”

Deirdre looked at her hands. Where before they had been smooth, they were now creased by wrinkles and blotched with liver spots. It was as if she had aged ten years in a few moments.

* * *

Bayliss shook his head. “I don’t know if the planet-linker thing had anything to do with this, but maybe the stress triggered something. Your body shows symptoms of aging that just weren’t there before.”

Deirdre felt a cold pit in her stomach. “I’m not going to stop using the empath chair,” she said, as if he could forbid her.

Bayliss checked some readouts on his touchpanel. “I can’t order you not to, Lady Skye, but if you do, and if it’s causing this stress, it could be fatal. Do you understand?”

She nodded. But how could *he* understand? What she had seen in that chair was larger than her whole life. “It was you who told me I didn’t have much time to live,” she said. “It looks as if my body took your word for it.”

“We’re still trying to get the treatments, Lady Skye. Don’t do anything foolish.”

She was about to reply when a stabbing pain hit her in the stomach, doubling her over. Bayliss hurried to her and rubbed her back until the pain subsided.

“What was that?” she gasped.

He lifted his hands. “Stress, I guess. Your joints are freezing, and the tissue in your body is breaking down.” Strangely, he reached out then and touched her face. “You need to take it easy.”

"I'll try. But I still have to..."

She was about to continue when her quicklink beeped an emergency message. *What now? It can't get worse.*

"Skye here," she said.

Goldman's face appeared. "Lady Skye, we have an unusual situation developing at the skyfarm crash site. You'd better get to the command center."

Her pain subsiding, she hurried to oblige.

* * *

Deirdre entered the command center to find all of her staff huddled around the tactical display table. "What is it?" she asked. "Evidence of sabotage?"

Goldman shook his head. "It's more unusual than that, Lady Skye. Our people found..." He motioned to a video feed on the tac table. A single bright beam of light swiveled back and forth in what looked like a narrow tunnel. "We've found some kind of hidden underground base."

"What?"

Goldman pointed to the video feed. "It's a series of tunnels, burrowed beneath the ground and sealed off by a metal door. It looks as if it's been deserted for years, but everything is in the right proportion for human inhabitants."

"Is it Morgan or Santiago, setting up bunkers?" Her mind raced.

"It doesn't seem like it. There are no signs of life, and we don't think anyone's been inside for more than fifty years."

Deirdre took a breath, trying to process this new development. For some reason the visions of the planet force came to mind, making her feel reckless. "I want to go and see it."

"It could be dangerous, Lady Skye."

“More dangerous than what we’re doing now? No. Meet me at the rover yard in one half hour. And keep this quiet.”

“Yes, Lady.”

Mystery after mystery. Suddenly, after fifty years of politics, she was an investigator again.

* * *

The journey to the skyfarm crash site took about three hours with *Gaia One* moving at top speed. As they raced Deirdre checked her personal datalinks, monitoring activity back at the base.

She looked up to see Goldman staring at her, looking concerned. “Yes?” she asked him.

“Are you all right, Lady Skye?”

“Yes. Why?”

He sighed. “I believe in you, Lady Skye, and I think we should resist Director Morgan. But if Morgan succeeds in removing you from power, or if something should happen to you, it won’t be me who takes over the leadership of the Gaians.”

She remained silent for a moment, suddenly bitter. “Why not?”

“Simper has a lot of support among prominent Gaian citizens. They talk of your fanaticism, and my unquestioning support of your policies.”

“My policies are a reflection of the world, not their politics,” she said, but the words sounded weak even to her. She stared out the window as the landscape rushed by.

Fanaticism. Was she a fanatic? Had she lived too long, imposing an outdated philosophy on a world that no longer found it relevant? Perhaps the death she had so far cheated had one simple purpose: to clear the way for new lives, better adapted to an ever-changing world.

She thought again of the planetmind, and wondered if it waited for her to return.

* * *

Gaia One crested a rise of low reddish hills and arrived at the crash site. It was a gentle hillside, sloping down toward the ocean, which Deirdre knew lay not half a kilometer away from here. She could feel the coolness of the air and smell the salt through her pressure mask, and she thought she could even hear the waves in the distance.

All around her lay fragments of glass, winking in the sunlight, spread in a radius of half a kilometer. Small security rovers had set up a light perimeter, and Gaian investigators combed the crash site, mostly ignoring her arrival. In the center of the site lay several chunks of long, twisted metal, which more investigators poked at, making notes in their touchpanels.

A stocky man with a calm face walked over from one of the security rovers, nodding to Deirdre. "Are you here to see the crash site or the hidden door?" he asked.

"The door," Deirdre answered.

Goldman came up next to her. "We'll want escorts."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," said the security man. "I'm Franklin. This hidden door is the damndest thing I've ever seen." He turned away and got on his quicklink, assembling an escort, then waved them into his security rover.

Deirdre and Goldman climbed in with Franklin. The inside of the rover was cramped and not very comfortable. Deirdre found herself shoulder to shoulder with Franklin, but he just stared out of a tiny porthole, completely at ease.

The security rover drove them past the crash site and up a short rise to a sheltered area in the rocks. As they crested the rise the rover stopped. Outside the porthole they could see a shallow bowl hidden in the hills and covered with some kind of red and orange

camouflage netting.

“I thought you ought to see this,” said Franklin. “This is a camouflaged shaft of some kind, about twenty meters in diameter. It goes right down the middle of this abandoned base.”

Deirdre examined the landscape carefully. “It seems utterly natural,” she said. “They made great efforts to disguise their presence. How did they dig such a thing?”

“Well, it looks like a lot of it was already there, some kind of natural formation that they carved out and put to good use.”

“The camo netting looks like adapted Earth military design,” said Goldman, and Deirdre nodded.

“You’re right.”

“That’s all long before my time,” said Franklin, smiling.

The security rover continued on around the rim of the crater and down to a rocky area on the other side. More rovers were parked there, and flares marked out a small area in the rock. “Here it is,” said Franklin, motioning them out. Deirdre noticed that he now held his penetrator rifle in a ready position. “We’ve searched most of it already, so we think it’s safe. But I gotta tell you we’ve been here less than a day.”

“So let’s be careful,” said Deirdre. Her eyes went to the door, which was more of a hatch, its rounded edges set flush into the rock. It was about two and a half meters tall. “Take us in.”

Franklin took the lead after distributing glowlamps to them all. Two more escorts accompanied them, with Goldman and Deirdre in the middle. They all approached the door and stepped over a low metal threshold, from the red world of Chiron and into the underground.

* * *

“It appears to have been partially carved from the rock and partially built from existing tunnels,” said Franklin, whose “steady but ready” military posture helped set Deirdre’s mind at ease on

entering the strange base. His voice sounded strangely muffled, rather than echo-y, as Deirdre had expected. The walls were narrow and dark around them, in some places roughly hewn and in other places smoothed to a glossy finish. It was dark, but she felt somewhat safe, as if nestled under cozy blankets.

“Get ready for this,” said Franklin. They came out of a tunnel and to a broader area that curved away to the left and the right. Straight ahead of them was a railing, waist high and made of metal. Glowlights from the team started swiveling in all directions as the Gaians tried to make sense of the space.

Deirdre headed straight for the railing, and Goldman followed her protectively. She looked over the railing into a shaft, twenty meters across like the opening they had seen above, and from up there she could see dim light coming down and the hazy outline of great fan blades, stilled.

She looked down and opened her lips in a silent intake of breath.

Below them the shaft stretched into blackness. Using her light on its highest setting she could see more railings ringing the shaft at intervals below, but no bottom.

“How big is this place?” she asked.

“Not so big compared to our bases, but very impressive since they carved it right out of the rocks. Most of the place is grouped around this one central shaft. There are three levels, and we’re on what we call Level One. Level Two joins a large network of underground caves, which have been adapted into what looks like living and working quarters. The shaft keeps going down below Level Three, but we haven’t been down there yet. It all seems to have been deserted for decades. There are also areas where it looks like computer banks had been stored, and other places reinforced by metal beams.”

“From the *Unity*?”

“Looks like it.”

Deirdre looked down the dizzying throat of the central shaft again. "If you were a leader, where would you live? The top level or down below?"

Franklin shrugged. "I really wouldn't know, Lady. But there's a series of well-built rooms on Level Two."

"Let's go there."

* * *

The group made their way down narrow staircases to Level Two, the air getting cooler and darker as they walked. Franklin led them back farther from the central shaft, through some short, rough-hewn tunnels, and finally into a series of chambers with walls polished to a high sheen.

Shining her light, Deirdre could see details around the tunnel arches that spoke of high craftsmanship.

They came to a room that was long and had a high, gently curved ceiling. The air felt very still, and at the other side of the room were two large doors, lacquered in some kind of black material.

Franklin walked over to the wall. "We find these things periodically," he said, playing his light across the wall. "Tiny holes, big enough to look through but difficult to see. There are narrow hallways back there that wind all over the place."

"Is it a place for spies?" asked Goldman. The thought of eyes back there gave Deirdre a chill, and made her more aware of the silence. She took off her pressure mask, holding it very close to her face, to taste the air. It was stale and close, warm and dusty. She pointed to the doors.

"What's through there?"

Franklin answered by walking over and pushing the doors open, and Deirdre felt a distinct change in the air pressure. She walked forward, her heart starting to race.

Beyond the doors lay another chamber, not quite as big as the last

one. In the very center was a large chair, almost like a throne, carved from some kind of unusual yellow rock.

Deirdre walked toward the chair and touched it. "It's perfectly smooth," she said. The others came forward, shafts of light crossing through the barren room.

"Look," said Goldman. He motioned back to the doors they had just entered.

"Yeah," said Franklin. "Isn't that something?"

Carved on the walls flanking the doors were two red dragons, coiling across the stone, their jaws opened wide as if to swallow a mortal foe.

"Dragons," said Deirdre Skye. With the lights playing across them, it looked as if they were moving.

* * *

The two security escorts and Franklin sat in one corner of the room munching on portable lunch biscuits while Deirdre used her quicklink to check on filings back at the High Garden. As she finished her work one of the escorts, a broad-faced woman, finally walked over and sat on the yellow chair itself to eat, shooting a wry comment back to her companions.

Deirdre lifted her pressure mask from her face again, sniffing the air. There it was again, that smell of salt.

"How close are we to the shore now?" she asked Franklin.

He pulled out a small touchpanel and dialed up a positional marker. "Less than two hundred meters, actually."

"I smell salt. Has this room been scanned?"

"No, Lady Skye. We're starting at the top and working down."

"Scan it now."

They brought in the scanner crew, and it didn't take them long to find the hidden door at the back of the chamber. After some prying and forcing, the door creaked open, revealing a long, narrow tunnel that sloped up.

"Hear that?" asked Goldman. Deirdre could hear it—a faint whooshing. Franklin activated his quicklink and relayed news of the find to his command post.

Deirdre, impatient, starting walking up the narrow tunnel, and the security people scrambled to get in front of her. The tunnel quickly narrowed so that she could feel her arms brushing against both walls, which were rough and slightly damp. They walked and walked, and after three minutes a gray light started to filter into the tunnel, and then they heard a rhythmic rushing sound, deep and vast.

The tunnel began to widen and lighten, and Deirdre felt her spirit start to lift. The air smelled rich and salty, and she felt a cold breeze on her skin. Then the people in front of her began to fan out as they emerged from the dark mouth of the tunnel and felt the cool open air. It was like emerging from sleep.

"I'll be damned," said Franklin.

They were in a small cove, sheltered among the rocks. The sky above them was deep purple as the moons of Chiron sent their bright light down. In front of them brackish waves washed up on a small beach, hissing across the rocks, while gray moon-touched waters opened up before them.

They were staring due west, into the sea.

Deirdre felt herself in the grip of a vision on seeing the vast ocean and the moons above it. She could almost sense the sea fungus, close cousin to the land-based xenofungus, swaying beneath the water.

Ignoring the murmurs of wonder from the others, Deirdre walked forward toward the waves as if following a siren's call. The rocky walls of the tunnel seemed to recede away from her, and she felt a

calm immensity fill her. She felt like a part of the sea, as if she were the long tendrils waving in the current, the dark water above and around her.

She stepped across the rocky shore, looking out into the ocean, where a mist began to boil forth from the water. And from that mist she saw a dark shape emerge and glide toward her.

It was a small ship, with great boxy sails that she recognized from datalink records of ancient China. It was a Chinese junk, but its hull gleamed as if made from some strange space-age material, and light glinted off the hull and off the sails in gold and red.

She stopped as an icy wave hissed up on the rocks and washed around her feet. At that moment the junk turned toward her, and she saw a figure waiting at the prow, a shadowy man in robes of shimmering green.

A chill ran up her spine, and the vision vanished as she felt something like a knife through her heart, and then she fell into the water, the salty waves washing over her pressure mask and into her mouth, choking her.

* * *

The next thing she experienced was a rush of darkness cut by jittering beams of light as she was carried up through the darkness of the abandoned base. She stared around, groggy, while her chest felt as if an elephant sat on it, crushing her.

She tried to open her mouth, but no words came out. *My heart!*

Goldman, one of the carriers, looked down over his shoulder at her. “You collapsed, Lady Skye,” he said, gasping from the effort of carrying her. “We’re getting you back to *Gaia One* immediately.”

She opened her mouth again, trying to say she was all right, but instead she arched her back in pain. She heard a shrill gasp, and some part of her understood that she had made the sound.

“Set her down,” snapped a new voice, a white-clothed medic. The medic took out an injection gun, set a dial, and put it on her arm.

Her heart, which was on fire, suddenly became icy as the injection gun hissed. Her muscles twisted in strange directions.

“Keep going now,” said the medic. “We’ll stabilize her in *Gaia One*, but we’ve got to get her back to the High Garden.”

Deirdre looked around, at the faces and the light and the darkness, her mouth hanging open against her will. Her world had suddenly become as small as what she could see, and as short as her next breath.

* * *

“It’s exactly what we were worried about, Lady Skye.” Bayliss had his back to her, as he scanned copious readouts from her battery of tests. She lay back in a small bed, staring at the ceiling as her heart pulsed feebly. He would never look at her when he gave her bad news, she knew. “You had symptoms of heart failure. Half your organs think they’re young, the others know they’re old, and you got caught in the middle.”

“My heart?” Feeling the rapid, feeble thumping in her chest, she thought she was dying right then and there. Thoughts of the dream state and the future of Planet melted away at this threat to her existence. “What can we do?”

He turned to her, his face dark with concern. “We have to get you in for the genetic treatments now.”

“How? Did you get them from Zakharov?” Had Zakharov relented now that her life was truly in danger?

He frowned. “We made arrangements, and man, aged to get half a treatment. Unfortunately I think you need a full one. We’ve had our best doctors working, and we’ve tried to round out the treatment procedure with our own technologies as best we can.”

She felt pain in her chest, and a fresh wave of cool sweat washed over her. She had trouble breathing. “Sounds...dangerous?”

He nodded. “There are dangers. But we didn’t push it too far. The problem is, you may not survive it.”

She shook her head. Her body felt torn in every direction, and she had sudden uncontrollable visions...the Planet's mind, the xenofields, the dragons twisting in the abandoned base. She gulped in a breath of air. "I'm ready."

"Are you ready for anything? For what could happen?"

She nodded. It felt as if a knife plunged into her chest every moment, and it was all she could do to think. "Do it."

"All right." He produced another injection gun from somewhere, and after a few minutes her heart stopped its hammering, and her vision constricted to a narrow, bright tunnel. She heard Bayliss's voice as if from a great distance.

"We're using every drug we've got now, Lady, to get you through this." It sounded so far away, as if he were floating above her. "We're putting all your body's systems to sleep, so they won't destroy themselves."

To sleep? As if they're dying?

There were more faces over her, and muffled sounds. She felt herself being lifted up, and she felt them taking off the sheet and then pulling off her patient's gown. They lifted her naked body onto a rolling bed and covered her with another sheet, and she was wheeled away.

There were hallways and elevators, going down into the secure medlabs. Her heart had slowed, but everything around her seemed preternaturally bright. Her thoughts moved at a crawl, which she considered a blessing.

More hallways, in sterile silvery white, and then there were people in green and white. It had gotten silent, and she now thought she could hear a whispering, like branches swaying on a winter night. They wheeled her and transferred her to another bed, a large metal bed, and she could see big consoles around her, and thick clear tubes. Someone whipped the sheet away; they left her naked, and she looked around at the tubes and the machines, and her heart sank. It had been eight years since she'd done this.

A chipper man in green and white with a broad forehead appeared over her. A small, sullen-looking Indian man shadowed him. The chipper man smiled and took her hand lightly.

“Lady Skye. Are you ready?”

She collected her strength and nodded.

“OK. We’re going to do this quickly.” He walked away, and his assistant started attaching sensors to her body. She felt him moving her limbs as if they were pieces of meat. Then the tubes came down, and the metal cutting instruments, and the other jagged metal things. She could hear her heartbeat reflected in some beeping machine, and she became aware of the unpleasant feeling of becoming part of something bigger, and not very organic.

“It all looks good,” said the chipper man, but she thought he sounded worried. He studied her face and skin, and then she felt the first needle pierce the skin of her forearm. A tendril of blood looped up through a thin transparent tube and into an exchanger.

“That’s just for testing and drugging, naturally. We won’t insert the heavy-gauge needles until you’re deep under.”

She nodded, and felt her skin go icy. Even through this haze, she remembered how much she hated this procedure. It terrified her, and these men would never know how it felt.

The head tech opened metal doors near the table to reveal small tanks of various fluids, including rich red blood in thick transparent bags, and a yellowing substance that was marrow, and a white-yellow substance that was lymph, and another canister of something thick and clear.

“We’ve adjusted these for you as best as we can. It should all be fine.” He looked at her again. “You need to relax.”

She closed her eyes and tried to recall images that pleased her—nature, flowers, the sun, the Planet visions. She could become lost in those.

“Ready?”

His voice now sounded clear and sharp to her, almost too sharp. She nodded.

“Say it aloud, please, if you can.”

“Yes,” she heard herself croak.

After a moment heat suffused her body, and her mind began to expand and drift at the same time. An explosion of warmth started in her pelvis and belly and bloomed outward, and she began to float on that powerful wave. She barely registered the jab of the heavy-gauge needle pushing its way into her arm, and then a robot-guided scalpel pushed in and peeled back the first layer of flesh in her belly.

Normally she would black out at this point, but for some reason she found herself still balanced on the edge of awareness. She could feel the void of unconsciousness, but some frantic thing racing inside her kept her awake. She felt a rush of horror when she realized that she couldn't move.

Do they know what's going on? I'm not asleep!

She couldn't see anyone. She tried to move her hands, but they were paralyzed. The pain began to increase as needles sank into her biceps, her forearms, her thighs and shins, her belly and her throat and other places. The pain warred with the pull of unconsciousness as sharp instruments pulled her open and ripped out the dying things inside her. She felt it all, her body literally being torn open, until she finally sank into darkness on a wave of pain.

* * *

The machine ground her body. It pushed blades and needles into her flesh and sucked out everything inside her, spitting her flesh out like pieces of soft fruit. Suction pulled the blood and the marrow and the lymph from her. Machines lifted delicate webs of nerves from her body, pulling them to get to the places underneath. Substances both natural and synthetic, made from her own genetic material and processed in the labs, were fed back into her body.

She lived through all of this in a series of half-waking states, rising and falling from unconsciousness to agony. When the metal dug deep into her she tried to scream but couldn't, and focused again and again on those Planet visions, on a world that was too big to feel such pain.

She knew she would rather die than ever go through this again. But as she contemplated the great void of death, a part of her also knew that she would never really give up the treatments. Her body would push her toward life, whatever the cost.

Finally she felt her flesh closing, and she sank into a final sleep as the machines withdrew. Her last thought was a prayer that she would not awaken for weeks, if ever.

* * *

She opened her eyes to a white blur. She was in a sterile white recovery room, with a white-clad nurse above her. Next to the bed she could see a bowl full of hybrid lemons and a clear pitcher of water. Every part of her body burned.

The nurse looked down at her and gave her a tight smile. He took a needle, and her skin flinched at the thought of it, but whatever he injected gave her some comfort. Every part of her body ached, down to the bones, which had been split and reformed during the treatments.

"How long?" she managed to croak, her throat on fire.

"I'm going to let the doctor speak to you," said the nurse, and hurried off. She wondered at that for a moment, and then realized that the nurse may have thought she was asking how many years of life she'd bought, instead of how many days she'd been under.

She waited for an indeterminable amount of time and then decided to rise. The IV lines were long enough to accommodate her moving as she pushed her way from under the sweaty white sheets.

She staggered two steps from the bed, and every step sent shafts of pain down her legs and shins. Against one wall was a large mirror,

always there by her request. She stood in front of it and stared.

Naked, she could see the sheen of sweat on her skin and her stooped posture. Her body was covered by a latticework of horrible scars that were partially covered by pseudoflesh. The doctors would administer layer after layer of the pseudoflesh until the scars faded, but for now she could see their ugly tracks all over her, many still crusted in scabs and blood. They crossed her arms and legs, her throat and scalp, and back and forth across her belly. She felt more pain just looking at it. Small monitors were embedded into her flesh in various places, keeping track of vitals and allowing drainage of waste.

“It’s too hard,” she whispered. Her eyes misted over. She felt as far from the natural world as she could be.

But in the back of her mind she wondered how to get more of Zakharov’s treatments, and what she would have to do to get them, and that made her wonder what had happened to the Gaian territories while she had been under.

She staggered back to her bed and summoned Goldman on a quicklink. And on the link’s date/time display she noticed that it had been six days.

It was just about time for the Council’s deadline.

* * *

Goldman appeared at the door within minutes. He crossed the room and sat by her bed, keeping his distance, as he always did when she came out of the treatments. The process was hideous, the results were hideous, yet most people envied her this process.

Goldman himself was showing his age, she realized. His face looked even more haggard, as if he had aged years in the past week, but he set his jaw firmly. His long exercise sessions in the pools and his half treatments kept him healthy, but it wouldn’t keep him alive as long as her.

“What’s happening?” Her voice was husky, and it still hurt to talk.

Goldman looked down at his hands in his lap.

“I’ve held the Gaian advisors at bay. There were those who wanted to turn over the data to Morgan and Zakharov while you were under, but I wouldn’t allow it. Besides, they don’t know that the datalinks no longer hold the data.”

“Where?”

He patted his chest. “The datacards are here, around my neck, and there they will stay until you want them.” He sighed. “Morgan has moved his drills closer to the hills. There’s been no word of reprieve from the Council, and I checked the settlement territory map. They’ve already marked the changed boundaries. Tomorrow, at dawn, that land will be his. As for the abandoned base we found...” He hesitated, looking at her.

“What?”

“The place had been wiped clean, mostly. But one of our investigators found a couple of fingerprints. They compared it to the records from the original *Unity* mission.” Goldman shook his head. “The fingerprints are from Executive Officer Yang. It looks as if he built this base, and then vanished.”

Part **II**

From the Sea

Chapter Seven

Sheng-ji Yang. His name evoked many conflicting feelings in Deirdre, even after all these years. She lay in her bed, breathing shallowly and remembering a man with a strong body and an iron will. It didn't surprise her that he had somehow managed to survive planetfall, when everyone had figured him dead.

But where had he gone? And why had he left, when he had been so close to Deirdre Skye's own initial base?

Dragons. She had known it was him, on some deep level, when she saw those dragons coiling along the wall under her glowlamp. And at the thought of dragons her eyes wandered over to her bedside table, where a thin red tube coiled from a glass bottle. She put the end of the tube between her lips and pressed a button on the glass bottle, dispensing a dose of stimulants into her mouth.

Damn Zakharov. She could feel her body slipping further into decay, and closer to death. Every hour she wondered if she would even be able to climb from her bed, and still Zakharov returned her entreaties with the same message: *Send me your data.*

They were trying to kill her. She thought of Pravin, and the rest of the Council. They would want to know about Sheng-ji Yang and the abandoned base. But then, what had they done for her lately?

* * *

The deadline for turning over her research data passed with no further word from the Council. As Centauri A prepared to rise the next morning, an attendant helped Deirdre out of her bed and into a simple, pale green wrap. She sat gingerly in a padded wheelchair, and the attendant took her to the command center, where her staff had gathered.

Perhaps it was the aftereffects of the treatments, or perhaps it was

the knowledge that she was now at death's door, but Deirdre's body felt as if it would never recover. Every joint ached, and pain tore through her chest and belly at intervals. Drawing a deep breath took effort, and even shallow breaths rattled in her chest.

No one asked how she felt, and she appreciated the gesture. Simper looked at her several times, his brow wrinkled with concern, although whether the concern was for her or for his own political machinations was hard to tell.

She dismissed her attendant and wheeled the chair to the tactical table under her own power "Where are the Morganite bastards now?" she asked, her voice gravelly from disuse.

Goldman pointed to the tac table. "They've moved their drills to the front, each one supported by what we believe are military units of some sort" The light from the tac table set the creases on his face into deep relief. "Our scouts are on the nearby hill, watching them."

"They can't stay there for long," said Simper. "Because it's almost time for that land to become Morgan's." He punched up an external video feed of Centauri A's first rays crossing the horizon. At that moment a priority message came in from Director Morgan.

"Play it," said Deirdre.

Shani, the beautiful mocha-colored woman from before, appeared on the screen, and Deirdre realized that Director Morgan wouldn't even deign to deliver this ultimatum in person.

The woman spoke. "Lady Skye and advisors, this is a prerecorded message. The land to your west has been turned over to Director Morgan by decree of Council. Please remove any Gaian equipment or vehicles from this land immediately." Deirdre caught just a hint of a smile as the woman nodded and terminated the message.

Deirdre stroked her hair absently. After a few moments she realized that there was a silence in the room, and everyone was looking at her, waiting for direction.

"There may still be time to turn over the research data," said

Simper.

Deirdre realized that he looked rather nervous, and for some reason this made her feel better. *What the hell*, she thought. *Life is short* “There’s no research data to give them,” she said. “It’s been deleted from the datalinks and hidden.”

Simper’s mouth literally fell open, and he went pale from shock. “You *cannot* jeopardize the lives of us, of all of us, by destroying that data.” She could hear fury boiling in his voice, and she felt an odd stab of fear that he might get violent. She realized that she could not run, that she could barely move, really, and so she decided to take a cue from her poor, ravaged body and just sit calmly.

“I’m your leader,” she said. “I make those decisions.”

“You’re playing with lives, lives that will last a lot longer than yours.” He stabbed a trembling finger at her, then suddenly he advanced around the table toward her. “You must tell us where you’ve put that data, Lady!”

Deirdre saw Simper coming at her, and then she saw Goldman lunge at him. Simper twisted and stumbled right toward her as Goldman and two others converged on him, pushing him down. They all toppled over in front of her, and she felt her chair knocked, hard, and she caught her breath as everyone fell in a thrashing heap, Simper underneath.

“Restrain him!” shouted Goldman.

Deirdre sat calmly in her chair, waiting for this chaos to blow over. It seemed distant from her, all the bustling, and she found it oddly amusing.

Then she became aware of a rhythmic booming sound, coming from one of the video feeds. It was soft from the speakers, but the timbre indicated that the sound was loud at its source.

“Stop!” she said. “Let him go, and look at the video feed.”

They untangled one by one and looked to where she pointed.

Simper was the last to get up, brushing his clothes off angrily, and then he, too, looked at the video feed.

“They’re flamestriking the trees,” Deirdre said. Everyone watched in horror.

* * *

The ecosystems that Lady Deirdre had nurtured through her research efforts on Chiron had finally achieved a level of harmony worthy of her goals. She had created a perfect hybrid forest, the trees as lush and human-friendly as the richest on Earth, but able to thrive under the Chiron sky.

And they covered the hillsides that Morgan wanted to mine.

Deirdre stared at the video feed. Sleek, silver-gray machines pushed forward, long cannon barrels swiveling. Tall, noble hybrid pines burst into towering columns of flame in the blink of an eye, as the machines hurled fists of concentrated heat across the hillsides. A tree burst every second, and then every half second, as Morgan’s machines rolled forward and stepped up the pace of fire. The trees exploded like popcorn, leaving spindles of ash in their wake.

“He could take care of those trees another way, by cutting or burning all at once,” said Goldman. “He wants us to see this. He wants it to hurt.” The other Gaians stood silent as they watched the beautiful forests destroyed, and even Simper looked dismayed, his hand touching his throat.

“How are the scouts?” asked Deirdre.

“They’re falling back,” said Goldman, checking a report. “The flames are so intense that they’re cooking the outsides of the vehicles.”

“Order them to full retreat. Give Morgan his bloody territory.”

Goldman ordered the retreat while Deirdre continued to watch. Director Morgan had taken his territory, and Zakharov controlled the treatments that could save her life. With all of her physical assets vanishing, her thoughts drifted again to the planetmind, and

she wondered if Planet would feel joy at crushing these humans like insects.

* * *

Deirdre met with Goldman and Simper in her small office near the command center.

"I've tried all diplomatic channels," said Deirdre. "Governor Lal offers no help, and the same is true of the others. They want the research data, and nothing less."

Simper's hands had tightened into bony fists on the table. "If the Gaian citizens knew you had destroyed that data, Lady Skye, it could mean the end of your leadership. You wouldn't cut it as a dictator."

"Those who wanted to go to the other leaders could have gone a long time ago, Simper. It's people like you who stir them up against me."

His jaw tightened. "You're going to leave us soon anyway, Lady Skye. Why punish us, and steal our hope for a better world?"

"This is getting us nowhere," said Goldman. "Lady Skye has made her decision, and she's still very much alive."

"At least put the datacards in Gaian stewardship," said Simper.

"No," said Deirdre, managing a wry smile. "And if you keep trying to raise my blood pressure, Simper, I'll die right here, and you won't ever find the data."

Simper stared at her, speechless. She stared back, then experienced a fit of coughing, which ruined the moment a bit. She turned to Goldman. "I want to attack back. One large mindworm boil. Not too big, so they don't suspect we're controlling it. Get Lindly to direct it"

He nodded. "Yes, Lady Skye."

She turned to Simper. "If you want to go where you're going to the Morganites, then go. But I won't have you undermining my efforts

here. The research data is a golden ticket that will, in time, let its holder have her way with this world, and anything that lives on it. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She couldn't miss the flicker of greed in his eyes, which he quickly stifled. He shook his head. "I don't believe you. We wouldn't be in this predicament if that were true."

"It's not true yet, but it will be." With great force of will, she pushed herself up from the wheelchair, her legs trembling. She stood for a moment, swaying, until Goldman stood up to support her. "You may be right about all this, Simper, and if so you'll soon know it. But I'm going to finish this battle the way a Gaian would, fighting for the world and not against it. If I'm wrong, you'll get all the backing you need from our citizens."

She turned away. Her hand had gone to Goldman's arm automatically. Her body had become a flawed vehicle that carried her brain, and her will, from place to place.

But she enjoyed Goldman's touch. It steadied her.

Later in the day

The mindworm attack was about to begin. Deirdre used her wheelchair to get down to the command center, but then left it outside, ignoring the ache in her legs as she limped through the door. The pain was starting to wear her down, turning every movement into a struggle, and forcing her to consider her every action carefully.

Inside the command center everyone watched the tac table intently, and Deirdre joined them, standing next to Goldman.

There was a video feed of Lindly on a rocky hilltop, with the Morgan camp in the middle distance. Lindly wore a long, loose-fitting tunic, and she was already in the worm trance, her motions flowing like a dancer's.

“We’ve found that she can direct the worms quite well from this distance,” Goldman murmured to Deirdre. “She just has to see the lay of the battlefield.”

Deirdre nodded. “Good. As long as she remains hidden from the Morganites.”

On a second video feed they saw an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair and a firm, upright bearing. She moved as gracefully as Lindly, but with slower, less flamboyant movements.

“Elsa Tonne,” said Goldman. “She’ll call forth the second boil, which will attack the Morgan camp from the flank.”

Finally, on a third video feed they could see the hillsides with the Morgan machines crawling all over them, a metal infestation, and Deirdre had to bite her lip when she saw the smoking brown stumps of her forest.

An adjacent tongue of xenofungus started to shimmer, as if by a trick of the light, and then the worms began to rise. They quickly formed up into a squat pillar about half a kilometer wide, then split into five groups, melted into the fungus, and reformed.

“Showoff,” Deirdre murmured. “We’re supposed to keep this subtle.”

On the first video feed Lindly pushed her arms forward with a sudden, violent motion. The mindworms lashed into the air like a whip, and then they raced out of the xenofields like a tongue of flame following a gasoline spill, fast, hungry, and low to the ground. They hit the edges of the Morganite camp, and the gray-suited warriors there broke quickly, buried beneath the hissing worm mass.

“Those people are dying,” said Goldman quietly. “We’re now at war.”

“Guerrilla war,” muttered Simper.

The worms continued to spread, racing around the Morgan security vehicles and toward the drills. From a distant tongue of xenofungus

behind the camp, another worm mass began to assemble, but it seemed slow to enter the camp.

“Why isn’t the second boil out?” asked Deirdre.

“The two boils sometimes repel each other, or sometimes they merge, ruining the attack pattern,” said Goldman. Indeed, the second boil started to skirt the camp, flowing into Lindly’s boil like quicksilver beads rejoining.

“They’re merging,” said Goldman. “Elsa is losing control.”

“Look at that,” said Deirdre, pointing.

From the center of the Morgan camp came three vehicles with odd blue discs on top. The three vehicles stopped at precise intervals, and out poured several dozen Morganite soldiers. They walked slowly toward Lindly’s boil in an odd, sluggish lockstep.

“Those are soldiers?” said Goldman. “They look as if they’re drugged. The worms will eat them alive.”

But Deirdre had a sudden premonition. “They look like automatons. Don’t you agree? It’s as if their minds are somewhere else.”

“So what?” asked Simper.

“Mindworms feed on fear. No fear, no food. These soldiers must be using the trance technology we heard about...”

The strange Morganite warriors opened fire with their spitters and flame guns, advancing on the worms and hitting them first at the weakest point, where the two boils attempted to join. The worms curled and died, and as the destruction spread, the boils began to split apart, losing their coherence.

“Someone is directing those warriors,” said Goldman. “A lot more successfully than we’re directing the worms.”

Where the first Morganites had done well just to hold their ground, these warriors now walked with slow but relentless steps into the thick of Lindly’s mindworm boil, spreading death before them. The

worms melted away beneath acid and fire.

“Fight!” said Deirdre under her breath. She punched open a link to Lindly. “Fight them, Lindly. Push the boil forward.”

She saw Lindly shake her head a little, and then the woman lifted her hands and rose up on her toes, her body a trembling rod of effort. The worms gathered and rose up into a wave, the crest meters above the Morganites, and in the background Deirdre could see Morgan drivers fleeing the mining and flamestriking equipment like tiny ants. But right in front of her, in the thick of the battle, the trance warriors moved in unison and annihilated the mindworm boil in front of them.

“What do we do?” The blood had drained from Goldman’s face, and he looked angry. “What now?”

“Look at them.” Deirdre pointed to the video feeds. Elsa had sunk onto the ground, shaking as her mindworm boil melted back into the xenofungus. Lindly still stretched up, her body a trembling rod. “Lindly is deep in the worm’s neural net.”

“What’s that doing to her?”

Deirdre didn’t know, but she watched a moment in fascination. Would Lindly snap? Part of Deirdre really wanted to see.

But logically, this woman was too valuable to the Gaians.

“Get her out of there,” said Deirdre into the comm link. “Elsa, too.” A handler rushed in and pushed a short rod into Lindly’s back, shocking her out of the worms’ neural net. She gave a shuddering gasp and collapsed on the ground, her chest heaving. The same happened to Elsa, and on the third video feed the remaining mindworms vanished into the fields as if they had never existed.

“Not good enough,” said Deirdre.

* * *

Deirdre and Goldman studied the footage for the tenth time, huddled in a corner of the command center.

"I don't see it," said Goldman.

"Right there," said Deirdre. "These Morganite trance warriors broke step, and this one, here, stumbled. The mindworms were getting to them." She zipped forward through the battle until after the worms vanished. "Look, that one who fell is still down."

"If you say so."

"These trance fighters make our life difficult, but they aren't invulnerable. Our problem is just that we need bigger boils, and we need them to coordinate with each other."

"If we use bigger boils, Zakharov and Morgan will know they were right to fear us. And Morgan may have more powerful and bigger trance equipment."

Deirdre shook her head. "We've seen their best. Restraint is not Morgan's strong card. He hates the mindworms too much."

"Maybe. Nevertheless, we've never used our largest boils in the field, we don't know how to coordinate their movements very well, and any such coordinated use would alert the Council."

"I'm starting to think, so what? We have to defend ourselves."

"We don't have a lot of moral high ground, Lady. What they're doing is legal."

Legal. Deirdre felt bitterness at that. "They made the laws to serve their own ends, Goldman. Why should we..."

"Lady Deirdre!" said one of the coordinators at the tactical table. He motioned to her frantically, his hand flapping in the air, and she hurried over. "There are more Morganite units arriving."

"What?" spat Goldman. "That's too fast. They must have been waiting nearby."

"It's worse," said the coordinator, looking down at the map schematic. "Look at this."

Red crosses moved from the south in a steady stream, also heading for the edges of Gaian territory. Deirdre felt her hands shaking. "Get a video feed," she whispered.

Goldman worked the cameras. On a new video feed a line of elegant red and black vehicles with great spiked weapons folded across their crests pushed their way toward the Gaian territories.

"Santiago," said Deirdre. "Those are Spartan hovertanks."

"Looks like they're joining the fight," said Goldman, and he had never looked so haggard.

* * *

Deirdre Skye left the command room, hobbling as quickly as she could. She had kept her cool in the command center, but the thought of Spartan hovertanks heading for her territory had terrified her.

We can't stand up to those tanks. We may resist for a while, but in the end they'll destroy us. But what they want, the research data, is still mine. And they want it because they fear it.

She went into her small office and opened a priority link to Santiago. She was surprised to see the official Spartan logo with a flourish of martial music, and then Santiago appeared, sitting in a sparse, stony room.

"Lady Skye," said Santiago, nodding to her. "It's been a while."

"Yes, Corazon, it has. Now please tell me why Spartan hovertanks are heading for my territory. I have no quarrel with you."

Santiago remained expressionless. "Have you heard of a pact brother or pact sister, Deirdre?"

"I can guess the meaning."

"Morgan is my pact brother, and he's asked for my assistance. Apparently he was attacked by two unusually large mindworm boils that came out of your xenofields."

“Those aren’t my xenofields, Corazon, they’re simply on my territory. And a random mindworm attack gives you no right to station your war tanks...” She trailed off. Santiago’s face remained expressionless, and Deirdre remembered the mindworms she had used to attack Santiago’s soldiers at UNHQ some seventy years before.

“Let’s bring Director Morgan into this conversation, Lady Skye.” Before Deirdre could protest, another window opened on her touchscreen, and Nwabudike Morgan gave her a nod hello.

“Lady Skye. And Corazon Santiago! The finest jewels on Chiron.”

Deirdre felt her hands trembling, and she put them in her lap. “Nwabudike, I was just requesting that Corazon order her hovertanks back to Sparta Command.”

“Ah,” said Morgan.

“My tanks have every right to join Director Morgan’s forces,” said Santiago. “This mindworm attack is proof you know more than you let on about the native life, as we feared. If we’re wrong, give us your research data to prove it. Either way, I’ll not leave my ally without protection from the vicious creatures that roam your xenofields.”

“You’ve got your territory,” said Deirdre to Morgan. “Why don’t you leave it at that?”

“It’s you who won’t leave it alone, Deirdre,” he said. He shook his head, and a low rumbling laugh started deep in his throat. “A day after my drills harm your hillsides, the largest mindworm boil I’ve yet seen comes out of your territory to attack my workers.”

“You were destroying trees and preparing to drill the crust. I’ve said over and over again...”

“We’re tired of the talking,” said Santiago. She punched a command into a console near her, and Deirdre saw a digitally signed document appear on the screen.

She stared at the flashing icon, not opening it. “Why don’t you tell

me what that is?”

Santiago smiled. “It’s a decree from the Planetary Council. Since you refuse to turn over your research data, we’ve acquired permission to search your territories for it. The search will be conducted by examination teams made up of Morganite and Spartan personnel working in tandem.”

“You won’t find this alleged data,” said Deirdre angrily. “Don’t even bother. You won’t find what you’re looking for.”

Santiago leaned forward. “We have our Council decree. We’re going to search your territories, top to bottom, and turn over every leaf in your gardens and open every console in every lab and living quarters until we find it. And if your people get in the way, they’ll be hurt. And if mindworms attack us, we will double the guard, and double it again.” She leaned back. “You understand me, I’m sure.”

“I’ll appeal this decision,” said Deirdre. Her whole body trembled, and she could hear her voice shaking. She cursed her own body for betraying her emotions to these two people, now her enemies.

“Appeal it, then. You’re endangering lives, and you have no allies anymore. This decree goes into effect immediately.”

Morgan nodded. “You can turn over the research data at any time, and we’ll call off the examination teams.”

Santiago nodded. “They’re competent teams. There shouldn’t be many incidents with your citizens, if they behave themselves. But if any of your people fire on us, we’ll return force with force. Santiago out.” She vanished.

Morgan spent a long moment looking at Deirdre, and then he smiled. “Director Morgan out.”

The link closed.

* * *

Deirdre immediately contacted Pravin Lal. There was a long pause, as always, and then Sophia appeared, her gentle face filling the

screen, haloed by snowy white hair. Deirdre reflected on how her own body had turned into something nearer to Sophia's almost overnight.

"Hello, Lady Skye." Her voice was soft, and her hazel eyes, swimming in the tears of age, looked at her with sympathy.

"I have to talk to Pravin now," said Deirdre. She felt her anger boiling as the implications of the last meeting sank in.

Sophia shook her head slowly. "He's in a retreat. He knew you would contact us, and wanted me to talk to you. He wanted you to know that things are out of his hands, and to point out that, while his central location is nice when convening Council meetings, it's a bad place to get caught in a war. Do you understand, Lady Skye?"

Deirdre thought of Pravin's territory, bordered by Santiago on the southwest, Morgan on the northeast, and Zakharov to the southeast.

"I can help him," said Deirdre finally. "I'll be his ally, his pact sister."

"With what, Lady? You have no army to speak of."

"Planet is my army," said Deirdre.

Sophia made a clucking sound with her tongue. "Don't say such things, Lady Skye. That kind of talk got you into this trouble. Pravin's hands are currently tied with affairs of state."

Deirdre nodded. Looking at this old woman's kind face, she couldn't feel any anger. For Pravin she just felt sad. "Tell Governor Lal that I sympathize, because I have my own battle to fight, and I will fight it. And despite what I see as outright cowardice on his part, I still offer my alliance. If he wants my trust and my help, then please have him contact me."

Sophia nodded. "I'll relay your message to him."

"When he comes out of retreat?"

Sophia smiled and closed the link. Deirdre remained silent for a

moment, and then contacted Goldman. His face looked troubled.

“What’s happening?”

“Lady Skye, teams of Morganite and Spartan soldiers are heading for the Vale of Winds.” The Vale of Winds was Deirdre’s fourth base, located on the south side of her territories. “It looks like they mean business.”

“I’ll be right there,” she said weakly.

She broke the link and stared at the wall for a moment, feeling the weight of circumstance crashing down around her.

* * *

The air in the command center was tense. Faces turned to look at her as she entered, a husk of her former self; the stims she was now taking helped her energy level but didn’t make her look any more attractive. In fact, they made her feel edgy, and even exacerbated her trembling, but it was that or pass out on the tac table.

She caught sight of a young Gaian, his façade of professionalism cracking into fear, and then she saw Goldman. Simper was behind him, also hurrying in her direction.

“Come here,” she said. She motioned them into one quiet corner and told them about the Council decree, and the examination teams heading for their bases. When she was done she looked at both of them. “We have to resist.”

“Well, we can’t fight the ex-teams,” said Simper. “They’re very well equipped. And to use the mindworms will only make things worse. The combined armies of Santiago and Morgan outnumber our pathetic security force by a factor of three, at least!”

“You’re the one who wanted Morganites running around the Garden,” muttered Goldman.

Simper shook his head. “You two plot attacks with your nonexistent army until the suns collide. I won’t watch these ex-teams destroy us when all we have to do is give them the data they want.” He turned

and walked away, heading for the door. "I won't watch you do it!" he called back loudly over his shoulder, and Deirdre could see furtive glances from the people gathered at the tac table.

"Bastard," said Goldman, staring after him.

"What do you think?"

Goldman closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Deirdre noticed age spots on his hands, and the thought slipped into her mind that Goldman was getting too old for all this, that both of them could be dangerously rigid in their thinking. Perhaps it was young Simper who now understood the world better than the two of them.

Or, *maybe, he's just a greedy young pig.*

"The first ex-teams will be small," said Goldman. "They don't want to hurt us and trigger any political backlash. Maybe we can let these small teams enter the Vale of Winds and then attack them, close off their supply lines, and maybe hold them hostage."

"Santiago won't care about hostages. It will only give her the excuse to call in the big guns. Her people don't fear torture or death."

"But Morgan would care," said Goldman. "He coddles his citizens. What I'm saying is, let's see what they do first, and then react to it. It's that or give them the datacards right now."

"And where are the datacards, again?"

He touched his chest, and Deirdre saw their shape under his uniform. She nodded.

Someone shouted from the tac table. "The first ex-team has entered Gaian territory! They're on Gaian territory, and heading toward the Vale of Winds!"

Goldman and Deirdre hurried to the table. "Send the standard message to Morgan and Santiago ordering them off our territory," she said. "It won't do any good, but let's make sure we have a record of this...travesty. And patch me through to Vale command. I have to let them know what's coming."

What was coming she could see on the screen— a sleek Morganite transport and a Spartan hovertank. They moved slowly, and a few soldiers even walked alongside in full armor, weapons at the ready and their faces swiveling left and right. Already, over their heads, she could see the tops of the stone towers that held the Vale of Winds and its inhabitants.

* * *

Deirdre issued her warning to Vale command, telling them not to fire on the ex-teams but to try to keep them out of the base. The tall, healthy-looking Gaian named Evans who took her call grew progressively pale over the course of her transmission, but set Ills jaw and nodded firmly at the end.

“The Vale of Winds has three thousand inhabitants,” said Goldman, looking over the tac table. “They have few labs; it’s more a factory and farming base. They build our highest-quality terraformers as well.”

“Strong, hardy people live there,” said Deirdre. “They’ll be good at hunkering down and resisting attack.” But she looked at the video feeds with trepidation.

Video feeds from the tops of the towers showed Gaian farmers streaming in from the greenhouses, farms, and xenofields. There was a kind of tangled confusion to their movements, and Deirdre thought again about how little prepared for war, and for violence, her people were.

But violence is a part of nature. Why do I keep forgetting that?

The ex-team appeared near the base more quickly than they could have imagined, rolling over the terrain toward the Vale towers. “Keep a link open to Evans,” said Deirdre. Goldman nodded and complied. The command center became silent in anticipation.

“All Gaians are in, except for a few who went deeper into the xenofields to hide,” said Evans, his face pinched as he monitored reports. “We’ve closed the main gates and secured the lifts at the upper levels.” He looked up to address Deirdre directly. “We have

sharpshooters positioned at the top windows. We could open fire now.”

“And get a plasma fist up your asses,” said Goldman. He glanced at Deirdre. “Lady?”

“No. Don’t give them a reason to bring in reinforcements. Don’t answer them, don’t open the gates, don’t let them see anyone in the windows. Act as if nobody’s home.”

“OK.” Evans sounded skeptical.

“You can do it,” said Deirdre.

The ex-team vehicles had slowed their approach. Deirdre switched video feeds to a distant sensor planted in the xenofields. The Vale towers, two of them, stood solid and impassive. The greenhouses and bubbletents and planting stations were as empty as ghost towns. A few vehicles and pieces of equipment were scattered around the farms and the low, barren hills.

The ex-team approached an outlying greenhouse compound cautiously, like an animal sniffing out its prey. The forward guards held their weapons at the ready, long penetrator rifles chosen more for show than for compact effectiveness. They spread out with precise movements, creating a perimeter, and then paused.

“They must be demanding that anyone inside come out,” said Goldman into the silence of the command center. The moment seemed to drag on, while the stone towers with their glinting windows loomed in the background.

The blast came quickly, as a ball of yellow-white energy burst from the front of the Morganite vehicle and shattered the doorway to the greenhouse. A small sphere, dark and rubbery, bounced from the vehicle and through the door, and an instant later the panels on the roof blew out, sending a fountain of glass into the sky.

“Bastards,” said Goldman.

“What’s going on?” came the shrill voice of Evans. “I thought they were looking for scientific information!”

“They want us to know they mean business,” said Goldman.
“Control yourself.”

Deirdre ignored them both, watching the video feed as the ex-team foot soldiers burst into the greenhouse compound. “Do we have a video feed in there?” she asked, not really sure what she wanted the answer to be.

“No,” said Goldman. He played with the camera until they could see through one of the shattered glass walls.

The soldiers went through the place with ruthless efficiency. They overturned barrels of fertilizer, fired their rifles into farming equipment, and kicked down internal doors. They did it all with controlled, coordinated movements.

After they had searched the building, Deirdre could see them hunched over the datalink consoles inside. Two more people got out of the Morganite rover, wearing light armor and carrying silver cases. They went into the cleared greenhouse and approached the consoles.

“Those must be their data technicians,” said Deirdre. “Cut off access to the datalinks from that greenhouse, and from all other sources outside the base.”

“Already done, Lady,” said Evans.

If the ex-teams were dismayed, they gave no indication. The technicians calmly returned to the rover, and the soldiers filed out. The ex-team continued on toward the Gaian base.

Sixty seconds after they left, a fiery blue burst engulfed the greenhouse. When the blue fire cleared there was nothing left of the greenhouse but a crater full of bubbling metal and glassy residue.

The ex-team soldiers didn’t even look back.

* * *

Now they picked up their pace, no longer stopping at each outlying shed. They continued on relentlessly, and at every step a surge of

blue-white fire, or a roiling yellow cloud of fungicide, or the burst of a gatling laser lanced out to destroy a building or a piece of equipment, or to scorch their crops to the ground.

“They’re showing off,” said Goldman. He shook his head. “They’re not even leaving an electrostatic hoe behind.”

The ex-team vehicles approached the bottom of the taller stone tower, where the gates had been sealed against them. “They’re linking to us, Lady Deirdre,” said Evans. “They’re demanding that we open the gates.” His voice sounded shaky.

“Don’t answer. Do nothing,” said Lady Deirdre.

“They’re leaving themselves open to an aerial attack,” said Goldman. “We could lob a concussion round right on top of their vehicles.”

“And then they’d call in reinforcements,” said Deirdre. “They *want* us to attack.” She thought for a moment. “Just how strong are those gates?”

“Plasma steel, reinforced with a static screen. It should hold them off for a while.”

But as they watched, the ex-team soldiers spread out, and the Spartan hovertank opened like a moth unfolding its wings. From the front of the tank bright blue-white lasers cut at the door while a series of slender missiles rocked the gates, over and over again. At each blast coils of blue-white fire swirled away, licking the surface of the tower.

“We can feel that up here!” said Evans. “It’s shaking the floor!”

“Guard the main shafts. Get everyone as high in the towers as possible,” said Deirdre. “If they get in...”

But there was no *if*. Even as she spoke the gates buckled, and the next blast sent the massive gates reeling inward, revealing a large warehouse area full of rovers, speeders, crates, and other equipment. “Is anyone down there?” asked Deirdre. Evans shook his head wordlessly.

The hovertank shifted weaponry, sending a rapid stream of concentrated laser blasts into the opening. The warehouse turned into a raging cube of white fire, and when the fire finally stopped the inside had become a tangled, smoking mass of metal and plastic. Colored flames licked off scorched barrels of chemicals.

“What now, Lady Skye?” asked Evans.

Lady Deirdre shook her head. This was only one of the teams. She touched her face with a trembling hand. “Warn them off. Fill the elevator shafts with random bursts of fire, with chemical attacks, with anything you’ve got. Don’t let them up. If they do get up, flee. Prepare to evacuate from the roof. Those who are caught...remind the captors of settlement law, and ask for safe passage to a Gaian base.”

“What about the research data? Should we give them what they want?” His voice was getting shrill.

“You don’t have what they want,” said Deirdre. “Be strong.”

The ex-teams entered the smoking ruins of the storage room. The hovertank remained outside, its deadly wings open. More soldiers, Morganite and Spartan, poured out of the vehicles and ran into the smoking storage room, where the sound of shredder and penetrator rifles seemed refreshingly feeble after the onslaught of deadly energy weapons.

Goldman touched Deirdre on the shoulder and motioned her back to a corner of the room.

“Lady Skye, I’ve just received word that another ex-team is heading for Autumn Grove, and two more are circling toward the hillsides east of this very base.”

“We’ll have to prepare everyone, then,” said Deirdre.

“These attacks are worse than I anticipated. People are going to die.”

Deirdre nodded. “It’s time to call out the mindworms, in force. Every brood trainer we’ve got.”

Goldman watched her with concern. "They aren't good enough."

"We have no other way to resist And the enemy doesn't really know what we can do." *But neither do we*, came the unspoken thought.

Goldman nodded, then from inside his uniform he pulled a metal chain. Attached to the chain were about a dozen datacards. He handed the chain to her "I think you should take these now, Lady Skye. Morgan and Santiago mean business, and with Gaians dying I may feel tempted to hand these over."

Deirdre took them wordlessly and put the chain around her own neck, inside her tunic. The metal chain felt cool against her skin. "You, too, Goldman?"

"I think you should leave this base and go into hiding, Lady Skye."

She looked at him. "You want me to run?"

He nodded. "I want you to run. It's your only chance to save the datalinks from Morgan and Santiago. Because if you stay, you face two dangers: the invaders and your own citizens."

She finally nodded. "I'll go to Yang's abandoned base."

"It does seem to be the best place. I'll send our most trusted security people with you."

Deirdre clutched his arm as her mind started to race with possibilities. "If I go, I want the empath chair sent with me."

"The chair you're using for those experiments?"

"Yes! It's a valuable piece of equipment that can't fall into Morgan's hands. And we're making breakthroughs. I may be able to help."

Goldman stared at her. "If you think that's wise, Lady."

"I do. Me, the datacards, the empath chair, all hidden in isolation." She squeezed his arm with her hand, which had become clawlike from stiffness. "If one Gaian dies, you can counterattack, Goldman. I'm leaving the battle in your hands."

She could see his face, more haggard than ever from the stress of leadership, but she was already focused on using the empath chair, and journeying into the planetmind again.

“Don’t die on us, Lady,” said Goldman. “It seems that the chair can take a lot out of you.”

“It can. But in this case it’s worth the price. With the isolation and the proximity to Chiron’s fungus-laden seas, I think I can make a breakthrough.”

“Maybe just the mindworm attacks will be enough,” said Goldman. But she could feel his arm tremble under her hand, and she knew they wouldn’t be nearly enough without her.

Chapter Eight

Deirdre took *Gaia One* to the hidden base. The empath chair had been disassembled and loaded into an armored transport, and Sylvie and some of her other key scientists rode with it. They came reluctantly, confused by recent events in the Garden and angry that their research was being disrupted.

Yang's abandoned base had been transformed into a Gaian stronghold. The camo netting had been left in place and the security rovers hidden nearby. Inside the base, bright floodlights had been set up at key points, and the upper level of the base was now a command and living post. Harried-looking Gaians walked around, monitoring equipment that had been set up on metal tables near the central shaft. Indeed, the Gaians stuck very close to that shaft, where light trickled down from above and cut through the darkness and claustrophobia.

When the empath chair arrived, Deirdre had it set up in the dragon chamber, feeling drawn to the silence deep inside the base, where she felt she could focus better on the task before her.

And what is my task? To somehow figure out the entire ecosystem of Planet and turn it against the Morganites? Tall order...

And as she felt the clock in her own body run down, she reflected that failure might ruin the lives of generations of future Gaians.

She shied away from that thought. In fact, she had convinced herself that there was still time to back out, that she could settle with Morgan and Santiago and save her people the pain and suffering she knew lay ahead if they resisted.

While Sylvie and her technicians set up the empath chair, Deirdre contacted Goldman through a secure link. The moment he appeared, lines of worry creasing his face, she heard the sound of

an explosion from a video feed behind him.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Fifteen examination teams have entered Gaian territories, most of them small but well equipped and deadly. The Vale of Winds is under siege—the enemy soldiers are firing up the shaft, and we’re firing down it. We don’t think they’re going to stay down there for long. And it looks like Santiago had a new weapon we didn’t anticipate: air power. She’s got prototypes of armed jets, long and needle-shaped.”

What next?

“Any casualties?” she asked.

“Four Gaians have been hit by flying glass. Another has a broken leg, hit by stunner bolts as they fled one of the teams near Autumn Grove. The people are concerned, Lady Deirdre. I think they need to hear from you.”

“They will. How about the mindworms?”

“We’ve got our best brood trainers ready to go. They’ve been calling the worms, getting them to the surface of the xenofields. We’re going to try and coordinate their attacks, but we’ve never done anything on this scale before.”

“When?”

He looked down, consulting something. “Five hours.”

She nodded, and suddenly felt herself entering a trance state, her mind slipping toward the rhythms of the planetmind. As she let her thoughts drift, the aches and pains in her body seemed to slip away as well.

“Good,” she said, cutting off whatever Goldman had been saying. “Launch the attack. If we wait, they’re going to kill us. Don’t expect to talk to me for several hours.”

“Lady Skye, I...” His jaw worked helplessly.

“You can do it. Skye out.”

She stood for a moment, collecting her thoughts and ignoring the studied silence of the Gaians around her. Then she turned and headed for the dragon room, signaling Sylvie to meet her there.

* * *

Lady Deirdre lay in the empath chair. She was dimly aware of Sylvie moving in and out of her field of vision, adjusting controls and fiddling with connections. She seemed to be taking an unusually long time.

The empath chair sat opposite the yellow throne. Lady Deirdre could see the throne from where she lay, and it seemed to shimmer in her vision as she slipped in and out of the dream state, waiting for Sylvie to finish her preparations. Behind the chair she could see sunlamps on tended clumps of xenofungus, which glowed in the tunnel entrance.

It was Deirdre who had deduced that the waving yellow-green tubules in the water of the cove were underwater extensions of the xenofungus. By placing clumps of tended xenofungus in a “train” up the tunnel to the sea, she would once again be connected to the network of xenofungus that seemed to span the entire planet. The trembling in her body increased as she waited to enter the planetmind.

“Do it, Sylvie,” she said, and heard her own voice as a sleepy murmur. “Stop fooling around.”

“I just want to make sure it’s all safe,” Sylvie said. She let out a deep breath. “I’m giving you one hour and then pulling you out.”

Deirdre’s hand slowly floated up and clutched Sylvie’s arm. “No, you won’t. You let me stay in for as long as I want. Unless more than eight hours have passed, you leave me alone.”

Sylvie’s face twisted into a bitter, anxious expression, and then she shook her head and activated a switch somewhere beyond Deirdre’s field of vision. For a moment Deirdre saw a flash of hope in Sylvie’s

face, and she realized that it was the fearful hope that Deirdre might die, here in the chair, and release the Gaians from her madness.

Then the light from the chair and the sunlamps turned into a haze that filled her vision and washed over her body, numbing it. She found herself again in the world of the planetmind.

* * *

She floated for a long time in darkness, feeling the sense of vastness coupled with the first primitive thought jabs. She felt warmth in part of her body, and cold in another, and she was aware of the closeness of the sea fungus, a sleepy, dark, and impassive presence compared with the shrill red vibrancy of the regular xenofields.

She began shaping the “thought-icons” that she used to communicate with the planetmind. First she focused on an image of herself, surrounding the image with layers and layers of pleasant feelings. Her body in the thought-image was old, almost skeletal, but the feelings that surrounded it were warm and bright.

I’m human-thing, she sent to it.

Something came back to her, slapping across her mind like a loud shout. She felt a rush of emotions, and she tried to sort them out as they filled her head. It was a message, a returned thought-image.

Lady-friend.

It spoke! She focused on a vast “YES!” which seemed to create a reciprocal stirring. The darkness in the planetmind started to open up again, and once again she was in the vast, bright neural net of the world, a universe that burst open around her.

She floated, getting her bearings. She found that the more she let the awareness of her body slip away, the more in harmony she felt with the planetmind. As an experiment she let herself sink into one of the shifting patterns of light and heat, as if sinking into a warm bath, until a sudden jolt of panic made her realize that she had almost lost her sense of the “deirdrebody,” the real self she left

behind.

If she lost her deirdrebody, would she ever awaken from that sleep?
Would she even want to?

The panic receded as she found herself drifting again through patterns of energy that opened up new vistas with each passing moment. She found that she could let her consciousness drift into these presences and actually “read” them, just as she could read the dark presence of the sea fungus nearby.

After a while she thought she could sense a geography—to the “west” was that dark presence of the sea fungus, and to the “east” were interrupted patches of warm xenofungus. This corresponded to the real world, ocean to the west of her and xenofungus to the east. Also to the east she knew her bases were under attack, so she drifted that way until she sensed an area of turmoil, and she moved closer, putting out thought-icons of concern.

Hurt?

She got no answer, but as she drifted closer she could feel something smaller and sharper than the xenofields, a kind of angry sparking. She moved closer to it and sensed more sparking beyond, arranged in a semicircle, and then suddenly, unexpectedly, she touched the mind of a familiar presence, a human presence. The human presence had pushed itself into the sparkbeings, struggling to move them on a scale so small it seemed beneath her to notice it.

She wrapped herself in the skin of the world, and felt the sparkbeings flickering angrily, agitating against the human control. She released a long breath, and that breath swept across the skin of the world like a quiet wind.

With no effort at all, she plucked the spark things away one by one and let them swirl back into the field of the xenofungus that had spawned them. The world tickled her with its pleasure, and that human presence, so faint she could hardly sense it, now broke away and vanished.

Deirdre floated back, enjoying the feeling of the world on her skin,

trying to drink in every small detail while experiencing the sweep of everything. She felt her own humanity begin to slip away again as her droughts and feelings became lost in the space around her. This time she didn't fight it.

A ripple of panic started somewhere in the human body she had left behind and sent pulses of fear into her thought web. She felt a sudden tension as some deep instinct of self-preservation pulled her back toward the physical world she had left. For a moment the tension became unbearable as she felt herself pulled in one direction by a thin, strong connection to her own body, and in the other direction by something so huge and multifaceted her conscious mind could never comprehend it.

She floated at a middle distance, and slowly, slowly, her body reeled her back, spinning its connection to her spirit like a spider spinning silk. At last, she could sense her deirdrebody again, and she floated down to it, and felt a ripping pain as the World left her and she returned to the world.

* * *

She awakened in a cold sweat, the room dim and ugly and small around her. She could feel her heart pounding heavily in her chest, and the fear of a heart attack gripped her in a very real sense.

She opened her mouth and choked out a few sounds, and then Sylvie stood over her, sweating with concern. She wiped her hands across Deirdre's brow, her eyes darting, then picked up an injection gun and fired something into Deirdre's shoulder.

Deirdre's heart stopped its jackhammer beat, and she felt a coolness wash over her. Sylvie seemed to relax a little.

Deirdre closed her eyes and recovered for a few moments. The things she had felt in the planetmind were slipping away from her, and she could already sense them as only a dim memory of something so marvelous and frightening it couldn't be described, or even reexperienced.

Finally she spoke. "How long was I out?" It seemed very important

to take command of the situation.

“Ten hours,” said Sylvie.

“Ten? I thought I told you to wake me in eight!”

“I tried, Lady. You didn’t respond, and we feared you might be dead. But slowly your vitals returned to normal.” She shook her head, fear rolling in her eyes.

Deirdre nodded, holding on to a dim memory of a bright world, and dancing sparks, and a floating connection to her body, but she couldn’t quite remember what it all meant.

Sylvie cleared her throat. “How long did you think you were out, Lady?”

Deirdre shook her head. “It’s like a sleep,” she said, shaking her head. “How can you know how long you have slept?”

“You should try and remember. It could be important for others who go in after you.”

“Of course it’s important,” she snapped. She shook her head in exasperation and climbed slowly to her feet, then wrapped a robe around herself. She felt off balance, trying to deal with prickly Sylvie when she had just emerged from a presence large enough to swallow the girl without notice. “What’s happening at the Garden?”

“Trouble,” Sylvie said, watching Deirdre uneasily. “They launched the mindworm attack while you were under, and something went wrong.”

“What?” Deirdre hurried from the room, grabbing her clothes as she headed for the command center in the abandoned base.

* * *

“It’s true, Lady.” Goldman nodded from the command center. Deirdre could see a lot of activity there, while in the background Simper sulked. “We gathered the brood trainers, with Lindly spearheading the attack. She summoned three large boils, and her

second summoned two more, to attack the ex-teams that have surrounded the Vale of Winds.”

“So what happened?”

“Lindly lost control of the mindworms, Lady. It’s never happened before. She said she felt as if some presence ripped them from her grasp, and then she felt a sort of psychic backlash. She’s retreated into her quarters in some kind of depression.”

A presence ripped the mindworms from her grasp... At those words Deirdre felt a sense of guilt and dismay mixed with a sudden exhilaration.

“Order her back. I’m sure it was just a fluke.”

Goldman shook his head. “We have our top psych doctors looking at her. She’s nearly snapped. The number two brood trainer can take over, but Lindly’s failure has complicated things.”

“How?”

“Morgan and Santiago have sent notice. The mindworms killed some of their troops, and they’re angry. The kid gloves are off.”

She felt her stomach drop. “Tell me what that means, Goldman.”

“Those needlejets, for one thing. They’re coming at the Vale. You should watch the video feeds, Lady Deirdre. Because right now there’s nothing else we can do.”

* * *

She watched the video feeds for as long as she could stand it. The ex-teams moved with precision, coordinating perfectly between the bloodthirsty Spartans and the well-equipped Morganite soldiers.

The needlejets came over the horizon, tiny dots that grew larger and larger. She felt her fingers twitch as her mind reached out for the planet presence, imagining the power of the planetmind sweeping in and destroying these things, but she knew that she was too weak to return to the chair.

The needlejets roared in arid fired their “streak” missiles at the glass-lined discs of the Gaian strongholds. The metal and glass shells shattered, opening wide gaps to the world outside. The needlejets sailed by, and Deirdre saw Gaian soldiers in their green uniforms firing penetrator rifles from the jagged remains of the upper discs. The jets circled back and returned fire, sending another wave of deadly force roaring into the cavity that was once the outer chambers of the Gaian base. A high-flying jet dispatched jump troops, who sailed down to land on the tower top and then rappel through shattered windows with weapons ready.

Deirdre scanned through the video feeds, perversely searching for scenes of the most violence. She quickly found them, as the well-trained Spartan jump troops pulled out penetrator rifles and laid into the defending Gaians. She watched her people, most of them farmers and scientists and new-world hippies rather than fighters, go down smoking from the onslaught.

“Surrender!” she said, though they could not hear her. “Why don’t they surrender?”

Some did, lifting their hands or throwing down their weapons. And some of them were shot anyway, if a Spartan with an itchy trigger finger caught them, while others were beaten down to the ground and quickly bound by restraints.

The jump troops moved deeper into the base. Her heart lifted as she saw one of them killed by a young Gaian lad hiding in the support struts of a high roof, but the other Spartans quickly shot him down and moved on without a backward look.

At the elevator shafts another battle raged as dark-suited Morganite warriors fought their way up the smoothly lined shafts. The Morganites had pried open the shaft doors and were trying to ascend a long series of metal rungs that led to the upper levels of the base, but the Gaians were somehow holding them off, throwing pop bombs down the shaft and dumping barrels of chemicals to cloud the air and fend off the attackers.

When the Spartan jump troops came up behind these Gaians they attacked them with no mercy. A brief firefight erupted, and when

the smoke cleared the walls were scorched and Gaians lay in smoking piles.

More Gaians came in through a cross door and opened fire, pinning down the Spartan troops. Deirdre felt her heart lift again, praying for the smallest sign of victory, but the Spartans were only biding their time, crouching behind nearby furniture. Within moments the dark-suited Morganites exploded from the elevator shaft, firing their souped-up weapons.

More Gaians fell, and more surrendered. The Spartans made quick work of them, wrenching their arms behind their backs to bind them.

“They mean to hurt us,” she said. “They know they won’t get the data by searching, so they’re trying to beat it out of us.”

Finally the camera she was viewing was destroyed in a wash of plasma fire, and her last image was of a Gaian lying on the floor, eyes wide with fear.

She stood up and paced the room, her arms twitching with fury. The calm vastness of the planetmind seemed far away, but the sparking fire of the mindworms seemed closer than ever.

* * *

She went to her bed near the dragon room and lay in a light haze for a long time. Thoughts streamed through her head—her dying citizens, the haggard face of Goldman, her own ravaged body, and visions of the planetmind. She turned and twisted on the bed, until finally the thoughts and tensions slipped away, and she fell into a kind of hypnotic half-sleep. The bed seemed to sway around her, and as she calmed down the swaying turned into a gentle rocking, and then she became aware of a rhythmic rushing sound inside her head, moving in and out.

The sound of the sea. She listened to it for a long while, sailing toward oblivion with it.

After a while she got up and wrapped a robe around her. She picked

her way down back hallway to the long hallway leading to the dragon room.

Inside the dragon room Sylvie sat at a metal table against the wall near the empath chair, and as Deirdre looked again she saw that Sylvie was asleep at the table, her forehead resting on a touchpanel.

She brushed past the yellow throne and then entered the narrow tunnel that led to the cove. She walked up it with no lights, and no pressure mask, listening as the sound of the waves grew louder.

She stepped into the cove, where a small patrol boat was now moored, bobbing slightly and grinding against the rocks. The two guards assigned to patrol the cove slept bundled in blankets, leaning against the rocky wall.

She shook her head. Outside the sky was darker than usual because only a crescent of one moon was visible. She walked to the boat and stepped inside, watching the waving shadows of sea fungus ripple beneath her and then vanish into the depths as she steered the boat onto the water.

She remained standing in the prow of the tiny boat, taking it past the waves and into the dark, cold world of sea and sky beyond. She looked up to see the stars blazing above her, tens of thousands of them burning in a sky with no pollution. The sea was black and cold beneath her.

She steered straight out from the shore, feeling the engine hum beneath her feet. And then, from out of the darkness, came a ship, the Chinese junk from her earlier vision, tiny lights shining from the railing and a shadowy form standing in the prow. The junk sailed majestically toward her.

“What a beautiful boat,” she said.

The man in the prow of the boat stared at her curiously. He was wearing green robes that shimmered. “Are you from the Gaians?” he asked.

“I am,” she said. “Who are you?”

He waited a long moment, looking down at her. "I know you. You're Lady Deirdre Skye. You're the person we want to talk to."

"We?" she asked. How did this man know her?

"Chairman Yang. He is alive, and living across the sea. Do you remember him?"

"Of course!" But she thought...*Chairman?*

The man nodded. "He wants to talk to you, about matters pertaining to your settlement Council. He asks for secrecy. Can you guarantee secrecy?"

"Can Chairman Yang help me?"

The man nodded once. "He'll contact you tomorrow." The man tossed a touchpanel down into her boat. "We're pleased to meet you at last."

The man bowed once, and the junk turned and headed back out to sea. As she watched him leave Deirdre repeated his final words to herself. *We're pleased to meet you at last.*

She looked down at the touchpanel, which was thicker than the ones she was used to, and framed in polished metal. A tiny dragon's head was etched into each corner, and she felt a thrill of recognition.

Sheng-Ji Yang, returned after all this time. For some reason it gave her hope.

She turned her boat around and headed back to shore.

The next day

The face on the touchscreen was calm and smooth, and the eyes were deep black, deeper than she had remembered. She saw lines of age, and the gray hair had been shaved close, revealing a head that was perhaps a bit too large and checkered with age spots. But his

attitude was pine will-to-power, and it was that intensity that brought her the biggest shock of recognition.

“Sheng-ji Yang,” she said. She shook her head in wonder, but he continued to stare at her calmly. “Do you have access to our genetic treatments, or are you some vision of the Yang I knew on the *Unity*?”

He smiled at her, but the smile showed little emotion. “I’m the Yang you knew, Deirdre. And I’ve managed to develop some life-extending technologies, as well as monitoring the technological advances in the settlements.”

She nodded. “So you’ve been spying on us.”

“A little.” That tight smile again. “I knew that someday I would want to reenter your community, and I wouldn’t want to play technological catch-up. So I keep an eye on things, yes. But I have my own laboratories, and my own methods for preserving youth.”

Deirdre simply shook her head, overwhelmed by the questions she wanted to ask. Yang continued.

“I abandoned the base you found more than fifty years ago, and crossed the sea. Over here I have built a few bases, and I have loyal followers. The time has come for me to rejoin the settlements.”

“But why did you ever leave?” She found herself thinking of him on the *Unity*, directing the operations of the ship under Captain Garland with a firm hand.

“That will have to wait for a face-to-face meeting. For now I’ll tell you this—I have many loyal soldiers, and some special technologies. In return for helping you against your new enemies, you must help me. I want to rejoin the settlements, but I must enter as an equal. I won’t beg my way in.”

Deirdre shook her head, trying to process it all. “How can I help you do that?”

“I want to acquire some of the Spartan and Morganite equipment and weaponry, and cripple their army in the process. It will take

military action, and I want your help.”

“I told you I don’t have much to help you with.” *Except the mindworms*, she thought, but kept that to herself.

“You have everything we need, Deirdre. You’re the bait. And when they come to take the bait, we can both spring the trap.” He stared at her for a moment, waiting for her answer, but she had none. Yang, the mindworms, the planetmind, all spun in her head.

He smiled again. “I’ll come visit you, and we can talk face-to-face. I can be there in one day, so please prepare. And please trust me.”

“OK, Chairman. Come and see me. At least we can catch up on old times.” She forced a smile.

“Things aren’t much like old times, Deirdre. Chairman Yang out.”

He vanished, just like that. Deirdre played with the touchpanel, but it wouldn’t turn on again, and after a while she set it aside.

* * *

Goldman’s face stared out at her in disbelief. “Executive Officer Yang?”

“Yes,” said Deirdre quietly. Both she and Goldman were in their respective rooms, alone, and she was very aware of the private nature of this communication. “He’s now called Chairman Yang, leading an unknown number of loyal citizens in bases across the sea. He’s returning to the abandoned base, which of course once belonged to him, to talk to me.”

“What does he want, Lady? How can he have hidden himself all these years, and why should we trust him now?”

Deirdre shook her head. “I’m as skeptical as you, but we have few choices now. This may be the miracle we prayed for.”

“It’s far too convenient for a miracle, Lady Skye.” Goldman chewed his lip. “I should be there. You’re going to need security.”

“Are you going to leave Simper in control of the army, then?”

Goldman shook his head bitterly. “No. But I don’t like this.”

“He says he wants to help us, you know. Morgan and Santiago have an alliance, why not the Chairman and I? I know that...” She trailed off, because she had started to remember certain incidents on the *Unity*, certain ways that Yang had looked at her and spoken to her.

“What kind of man was he?” Goldman broke into her thoughts. “On the *Unity*, I mean.”

“Strong and stern. Somewhat manipulative and controlling. There were certain people who fell under his sway, and would follow him anywhere, and do anything for him.”

“Was he trustworthy?”

Deirdre shrugged. “He sought power, and if you helped him get it, you would benefit as well. Not so different from any of us. But he had great discipline, great self-control, and he was a great fighter.” Indeed, that was an understatement. She had seen him spar in the training rooms, and many believed he could defeat Santiago hand-to-hand.

“So he’s power-hungry and cunning. How do you know he won’t kidnap you and hold you hostage to the Council?”

She snorted. “Good luck He’d get nothing for me.”

“The Council thinks you know where the research data is, Deirdre. And they’re right.”

“I’ll be careful. Franklin will handle security, and I’ll hide myself away until we’re sure there’s no treachery.”

Goldman shook his head. His face looked troubled and almost childlike as his fears multiplied. She smiled.

“Don’t worry, Goldman. Providence may benefit us this time. After all, I don’t think even Chairman Yang can understand our other advantage. We have the mindworms, and the empath chair.”

He shrugged. "We do have the worms. But the ex-teams are inside our bases now, and our best brood trainer has to have the drool wiped from her chin."

She wanted to laugh, but her body started to shake instead. "It doesn't matter. We still have the will of Planet on our side. And they may have the Vale of Winds now, but when they leave we'll attack them mercilessly. Get all remaining brood trainers to prepare themselves."

Goldman knitted his brow. "So you're surrendering the Vale for now?"

Lady Deirdre wasn't focused on him anymore, instead seeing a hundred puzzle pieces clicking together in her head. "Be strong for me, Goldman. And keep Simper under your thumb. You can handle it," she said, and suddenly she did laugh. "We'll talk tomorrow, my old friend."

"Yes, Lady," he said, and she broke the link. Then she got up and headed for the dragon room, ready to visit Planet again.

The next day

Deirdre waited in the cove in a long wrap, her ancient body chilled in the sea air. After a long debate with Franklin, who insisted she hide until Yang's ship had been searched, she had simply decided to wait on the beach, and damn the consequences. Franklin and eight other Gaian security personnel waited around her, all tense.

The Hive ship appeared from the sea, the Centauri suns behind it. The ship was large and made of some shiny black material, and its smooth, glossy prow pushed the water aside as it came closer. Deirdre could hear no engine, but there was no sail visible, and the ship slowed as it neared the shore. As it loomed above her, the deck about five meters above the sea, Deirdre fell back two nervous steps.

The ship came to a halt about eight meters offshore. Franklin sidled

up to Deirdre. "It must be riding very high in the water to come so close," he murmured. She could see his finger twitching on his penetrator rifle. "Mighty impressive."

From the prow of the ship four red cables snaked down and splashed into the water, and then four figures came over the prow and shimmied down. Deirdre's eyes widened as she saw them—their armor was simple and dark, without ornamentation except for a splash of red on the shoulders and some kind of energy weapon at the belt. Thick, dark fabric wrapped around their faces made their features difficult to see.

"Chiron, what is this?" Franklin muttered. "I wish you'd move back, Lady Skye."

But she just stared at them, fascinated by their strength and agility. Four more warriors came down the ropes. They hit the water and also stood at attention in the surf.

"How many did he say were coming?" asked Franklin.

"He didn't say," said Deirdre, and she realized with dismay that she hadn't asked.

At that a final figure appeared at the prow of the ship. He wore simple but elegant robes of blue and silver, and Deirdre could feel his piercing gaze even from this distance. He stood very calmly, surveying everyone below.

"I'm sorry to bring my guard along, Lady Skye, but trust must be earned, don't you agree?"

"Yes," she answered, and her voice sounded weak in the open space of the cove. "Is that you, Sheng-ji?"

"Yes, Deirdre." He bent over and took the rope and shimmied down it carefully. She was impressed at his strength, but noticed he moved with a slight stiffness. He approached her and extended his hand, which she took lightly.

"Where should we talk, Deirdre? I have food and wine on my ship." His eyes took in everything about her, and her guards, including

Franklin, who stood at her elbow.

Deirdre shrugged. "How about one of the rooms in this abandoned base of yours?"

His eyes lit up as he looked at the tunnel entrance. "Ah! My old base. It's been so long." He nodded. "You found the dragon room, then?"

"Yes, but we're using it for equipment storage." Of course, they had moved the empath chair away for Yang's visit.

"Oh." Yang nodded. "Anywhere you want, then."

"Your guards need to stay out here, sir," said Franklin loudly.

Yang fixed him with a look of amusement. "I'm coming to your territory unarmed. My guards would never let me go in there alone."

"Let's go to your ship, then," said Deirdre. She was feeling restless, and somewhat awed by the dark shape looming above them. She felt the need to see more of Yang's surroundings, to find out what made him tick.

"Good," said Yang. He took her hand and led her toward the ship. Deirdre was surprised, and before she knew it she was walking through the surf with Chairman Yang, the icy chill of the water shaking her somewhat. The first thing she noticed was that Franklin had not reacted quickly enough to Yang's sudden movement, and now splashed along behind them.

"Lady, I can't let you go up there alone," he said angrily.

"Deirdre Skye has my complete protection," said Yang. "But if you want to join us, come along."

A red ladder unrolled from the prow of the ship. Yang motioned Deirdre toward the ladder, and she gasped with surprise as he lifted her with little effort. She wrapped her arms and legs around the rope steps.

"I'm not sure if I can hold on." Her body trembled, and her joints needed her with pain.

"Very well." Yang climbed on with her, holding on to the ladder and her. "They'll pull us up," he said.

Franklin grabbed the bottom of the ladder as it began rising toward the prow of the ship. Deirdre looked down at him, feeling Yang's wiry muscles around her, and wondered again at how strange her world had become.

* * *

Once on deck Deirdre dismounted the ladder and fixed her robes. Around the deck several members of the crew stood at a respectful distance, wearing light uniforms or simple blue-black pants and no shirts or shoes. They looked stern, their emotions under tight control.

Yang led her and Franklin into the main cabin and from there into a simple but well-outfitted room with polished wooden floors and a table that looked made from a single piece of bronzelike metal. Blue silk curtains covered small windows, and on the table Deirdre could see the pattern of the ubiquitous dragon.

Deirdre sat gingerly on one of the silk cushions, and two young people appeared, a dark-haired boy and a blond girl, holding trays with several metal cups.

"Drink," said Yang. "You, too, guard," he said, looking at Franklin.

Deirdre stared at the cups and then at the children, whose faces remained blank and subservient. They were certainly not like any Gaian children she knew. She took a cup from the young girl.

"Thank you," she said, and smiled at the girl. The girl bowed without expression. She turned to Yang, who now sat on a cushion. "Aren't you having any?"

Yang smiled. "Later." He waved the children away.

Deirdre set her cup down without drinking and cleared her throat.

“Those children seem very serious.”

“They’re not used to the gravity of meeting a settlement leader. My citizens live very quiet lives, and haven’t been exposed to the variety of cultures that have sprung up across the sea.”

Deirdre nodded. “You seem to know a lot more about us than we know about you, Sheng-ji. Why did you disappear? We would have helped you...”

Sheng-ji touched his lips, and Deirdre fell silent. “I can only imagine what you’re thinking. The truth is, not everyone adjusted to this new world as well as you and the others. Many of my people died at planetfall, and many more went mad. We were lost and had little water, and the mindworms made life very difficult for us. I took my people into a network of underground tunnels that we found, and there we stayed. It was insular and safe, and my citizens came to like it that way.

“When some brave citizens built a small ship and crossed the sea, and came back telling us there were fewer mindworms there, and natural caves, there was great pressure on me to build a larger ship and take them all away. It was what my people wanted.”

Deirdre nodded. “But you knew we were there, right? I mean, you must have figured it out.”

“Not until many years later, Lady Skye, when some scouts crossed back to see if there were any signs of life. My greatest error was not to insist that we go looking for you earlier.”

“This makes no sense,” said Franklin, and Yang’s eyes swiveled to him. “This abandoned base, which you built, is only a thousand kilometers from our High Garden.”

“Your people are dying because they refuse to mine metals, correct? Every culture has its own quirks. My people feared the worms your people admire, and stayed hidden underground. And traveling even a thousand kilometers wasn’t so simple back then.”

“So what now?” asked Deirdre. “You want to rejoin the settlements?”

Why now?"

"Your settlements are expanding, and sooner or later you would cross the sea and find me. I want to enter the Council now, on my own terms." But looking at him, at his aged face and the way he kept his hands folded inside his robes for warmth, Deirdre wondered if his reasons weren't similar to hers.

As if noticing her glance, he continued, "I must tell you that I have worked very hard to build a virtual utopia across the sea. My citizens are well adjusted and live in safety. I want you to see what we've created."

Yang took out a touchpanel and showed Deirdre and Franklin a series of images. There were images of his underground bases, and simply dressed citizens walking in sparse but lovely gardens, and contented citizens doing work with their hands, bathed in the light coming down through the central shafts.

"Impressive," said Deirdre. "You built all of this?"

"We work hard," said Yang.

"How many are 'we'?" asked Franklin. Yang stared at him again.

"I have eight thousand citizens under my leadership."

Deirdre whistled. "I had no idea."

"We expanded quickly. Now the time has come to rejoin human society, and to take advantage of each other's commerce and technology. But without political and military leverage, people like Morgan will destroy the values we've worked so hard to maintain. My people are willing to fight so that won't happen."

Deirdre shook her head. "My citizens are getting murdered for their values."

Yang brushed his fingers along the edge of a gilded cushion. "There will never be an end to fighting, unfortunately. My people are dedicated, and will lay down their lives for a good cause, but I fear that our weapons are inferior to anything that Santiago and Morgan

have.”

“So are mine,” said Deirdre. *Except for the mindworms.*

“As I said, I want to enter the Council in a position of strength. I can think of no better ally than you and your people, who seem to share a vision beyond raping the world from cradle to grave. This is our best chance to hobble Santiago and Morgan, take their weapons, and make sure that they won’t attack my people as they have attacked yours.”

Deirdre looked at Yang, startled. “You want to attack Santiago and Morgan?”

Yang nodded. “I consider it an imperative.”

“Why should we help you?” said Franklin. “We don’t know you from Garland, and now you want to go to war?”

Yang chuckled. “Of course. I haven’t been at war for almost one hundred years, you know. It’s your violent neighbors in the settlements who make me feel I must defend myself.” He shook his head. “I want to help you, and help myself at the same time. We both win.”

“What exactly do you want from us?” asked Deirdre. She looked at the children with the trays of drinks, and they looked back without blinking.

“Simple,” said Yang. “Your people will resist the invaders’ attacks for a while longer, and I mean resist with everything you’ve got. When Morgan and Santiago move more personnel and weapons into your territory to crush your resistance, we’ll launch an unexpected counterattack, my people and yours. They won’t expect our combined numbers. We’ll cripple their armies and steal any of their technology they leave on the field. That will give me a power base here in the settlements, and guarantee me a Council seat.”

“If we win, and that’s a big if, there won’t be much left on the field to take,” said Franklin.

Yang looked at him. “My soldiers are very efficient. And you have

your mindworms.”

Deirdre looked at him, startled. How much more did he know?

He nodded. “I’ve seen you control the worms, although I could never duplicate your success. You and I can win this, Deirdre.”

Deirdre bit her lip, considering Yang’s proposal. The efficiency and thoughtfulness of his strategy had caught her off guard.

“Why don’t you attack them now?” asked Franklin. “You want our people to take the brunt of the casualties before you come in and ‘save’ us.”

Yang smiled. “I don’t care about being a hero to the Gaians. You must put up resistance so that we can lure Santiago and Morgan’s armies deep into your territories. If I attack too soon, Santiago and Morgan will coordinate their attack and defense too carefully.”

“I have to think about this,” said Deirdre. “How long do we have to hold out before you attack?”

“I estimate two weeks,” said Yang. “And you must create heavy resistance, to make things very unpleasant for the enemy.”

“Two weeks,” said Franklin bitterly.

Yang nodded. “It’s that or forever. I can stay across the sea or ally with someone else just as easily. But I don’t want to. I want you.” He looked at Deirdre and smiled. “Now, let’s eat and drink. You can think about this tonight. But I would like your answer before I set sail in the morning.”

Chapter Nine

Deirdre sat in a low plastic chair, a thick blanket over her legs to ward off the chill in the abandoned base's tunnels. She was explaining Yang's proposal via quicklink to Goldman and Simper, who had finally begun to digest the magnitude of what Yang wanted them to do. Simper stood behind Goldman, his mouth literally hanging open.

"I think it's our best chance for success," said Deirdre. "It's like a gift from heaven."

"Which makes it all the more suspicious!" said Simper. "We're in deep enough as it is. The ex-teams have taken over the Vale of Winds, and they have hundreds of hostages locked in our cold storage rooms. God knows how many others have died."

"No one wants to see those Gaians harmed, but turning over the research data would be far worse in the long run. This way, we have a fighting chance to remain a Gaian territory."

"A dying chance, Lady Skye."

"So you want to give up? Surrender?" Deirdre looked Simper in the eye, but he didn't answer. "Yang's attack will turn the tables on the invaders."

"I'm tired of hiding our power anyway. I want to launch a full attack of the mindworms."

"How will we disguise our control from the Council?" asked Goldman. "If the boils are too large, or if there's too many..."

Deirdre shook her head stubbornly. "I don't care. With Yang we can win this. We're going to wipe out anyone who sets foot in our territories."

“You’d have a lot more credibility if you would come out of those caves and stay here in High Garden with the rest of us, Lady,” said Simper “This Yang could betray us. He could decide not to show up.”

“I think he will show up. But if he doesn’t, this is still our last chance to remain independent. If we lose this one, we’ll be second-rate territories, annexed property, forever.”

“I can’t support this resistance,” said Simper, folding his arms over his chest.

I’m dying, Simper. So I have more to lose than you do, she thought. Turning over the research data to Zakharov would get her the genetic treatments she needed to extend her own life, but it would mean the end of the way of life she believed in.

“One week and it will be over, Simper. If we win, you’ll have more power than you could ever get as Morgan’s lackey. Besides, how much authority will he really give to someone like you, who betrays a way of life you once believed in?”

Simper set his jaw and didn’t answer. “Would you like me to prepare the mindworm attack?” asked Goldman.

“Yes. I’ll work with you from here. I think I can assist.”

Goldman nodded. “Good, Lady Skye. We could use it.”

Three days later

Lady Deirdre awoke in a tomblike silence. She was still at the abandoned base, in her small, windowless room, and only a small glowlight cut the darkness. It could be any time of day or night.

She stared at the ceiling. Out in her territories, she knew her Gaians fought and died against the invading ex-teams. She had seen the casualty reports, and the video feeds of Gaians throwing homemade bombs down elevator shafts and hiding deep in the xenofungus, fighting hallucinations for a chance to disable a passing Morganite

trance rover.

But right now, she felt that cold hand closing around her heart as the darkness pressed in around her. She could easily imagine herself in a coffin, a parade of Gaian citizens marching solemnly by with one last farewell before they buried her down in the Planet she loved.

I am dying.

One quivering hand reached out and found the narrow red tube of the stim jar. She brought it slowly to her lips, and pulled a dose into her system. She closed her eyes and waited until the pall left her and her breathing eased. Then she sat up slowly and looked at her quicklink.

It was time to return to the planetmind. She took the stim jar and absorbed a second dose, feeling her heart start to race, and then a third. An unpleasant heat suffused her body.

Now or never. Into the planetmind.

* * *

She walked down the hall to the dragon room. Once there she summoned Sylvie, who arrived quickly and helped her into the empath chair. Before Deirdre closed her eyes, she could see Sylvie's face wrinkle with distaste.

"Are you angry, Sylvie?"

"No, Lady." But Sylvie didn't look at her. Deirdre knew she had friends who were still at the High Garden, where Spartan hovertanks hammered the towers mercilessly.

"This is my last time, Sylvie. I'm going to help with the mindworm attacks, or I'm not coming back. So don't bring me out for anything."

Sylvie glanced down, her face a complex mixture of fear, surprise, and hope. *Hope that I won't come back at all?* She looked down at her body, which had become bony and weak. Would it be so bad if

she didn't return?

"I've left instructions. If I'm out for more than seventy-two hours, consider me dead. Control of the Gaians passes to Goldman, if Simper and his supporters allow it." She closed her eyes and nodded. "Thank you for helping me, Sylvie."

"Of course, Lady." Sylvie swallowed once. "Do you want the hypnotist?"

"I don't need him anymore. I barely need the empath chair." Deirdre slipped into the trance state, and the planetmind opened before her.

* * *

She floated for a while. The aches and pains that had crept into her body vanished, and then the part of her that was deirdrebody retreated, letting her mind mix with the essence of the world.

She oriented herself, infused by a sense of purpose. She began to travel through the energy "space" that was planetmind, its neural patterns springing from the xenofungus and mindworms and other native life forms. By moving her consciousness through these layers of energy, she knew she was also traversing the physical world.

She experimented with long sliding motions, feeling as if she were turning a globe beneath her and then stopping in some far-flung space on Planet's surface. She slid east, to where an angry tangle of xenofungus coils and mindworm sparks clutched around Morgan's four bases, and she could feel their malevolence. She added her malevolence to theirs, remembering the screams of Gaians dying under glass and fire, and several mindworm sparks agitated and broke off, moving in to devour the Morgan things that tainted Planet's skin.

If only it were that easy. No sooner had the mindworms attacked than they ran into the sting of Morgan's guard, and a conflict escalated in which mindworms died by the millions.

Back to the Gaian settlements she slid, where she could feel the

vibrating stir of the mindworms gathering, and even feel the violence wreaked on planetskin by the attacks of the human things, whose human names had begun to escape her now. She called forth mindworms from the hot beds of xenofungus, and sent them against the human lifeblips that roamed that part of the world, spreading destruction. She exulted as the attacks continued, and the human annoyances vanished one by one, while more flooded in.

It was difficult, in the vastness of the planetmind, to stay focused on such a limited space. She called forth a few more mindworm boils, and a part of her became aware that Planet was watching her, as much as its vast, crude intelligence could “watch,” learning the way she used the mindworms to feint and coordinate attacks. She floated back a little, and found more mindworms boiling forth, and this time Planet moved them in tandem against her enemies.

She smiled, and that felt like the suns pouring their warmth on the world. She slid again, this time farther west, over the rich depths of the oceans where xenofungus lived in that infinite dark safety. The silence of the sea refreshed her, and a part of her was aware of a quickening in her distant human deirdrebody, a feeling that crossing the ocean would perhaps benefit that human part.

So, to the opposite shore. And there, in the sparse hills that felt like a parching heat to her planetmind awareness, she found more tiny human presences, alien, driven like tiny nails into her skin.

Yang's bases.

She felt the deirdrebody's heartbeat accelerate, and the thought-world around her grew more vibrant, more clear. She could begin to make out the shadings of the fungus, the way it rolled across hills, and from that could begin to understand the lay of the land.

I can see the location of Yang's hidden bases, came the deirdrebody thought, very clear to her. The world grew brighter with excitement. She moved down toward the underground bases, five of them in all, five deep nails in her skin. She examined the swirls of the xenofungus and the pattern of the shores and the tiny blips of human life carefully, pushing every detail to the memory of the deirdrebody that shared her awareness.

She could even make out lines of human lifeblips moving toward the ocean and floating there, in metal shells, and she thought that somehow this was a very good thing for her.

And she could feel the pain of some other kind of human lifeblips, tortured things deeper in the crust, and this puzzled her.

Then, from nowhere came the sudden pulsing will of a powerful presence, something she recognized as a leader thing, and the presence surprised her. It burst from a tiny human dot outward into the planetmind, expanding in a wavering ring of thought energy. It interfered with the smooth flow of the planetmind, and the Deirdre part of her wondered at this projection. She slipped closer to it.

She could feel desire burning deep under iron will. She could feel thoughts exploding from their mind chains, raw waves of feeling washing out, projected into the planetmind. The leader thing was pushing itself into the planet web somehow, maybe not even realizing what it was doing, but intruding on her with its own alien patterns.

Does Yang have a linker of some kind, too?

She reached out toward him with her Deirdre mind, even as the larger planetmind that she shared protested. She touched the ring of thought energy.

And it engulfed her.

* * *

She awoke with the feeling of having been slammed into a wall of black bricks. Monitors screamed and warbled around her, and Sylvie worked frantically, face plastered in sweat. Sylvie moved her lips, but Deirdre could only hear a screeching, from something that echoed inside her, and she found herself for the first time awake between worlds, between the human mind and the planetmind, and the human mind screamed in protest as these two patterns tore it apart.

Sylvie mouthed something again, and then picked up an injector

gun. Deirdre frantically tried to pull the two minds together, Planet and Deirdre, desperately trying to hold on to the information she had gleaned, the locations of the Hive bases and the things she had seen in Yang's projection. It was like staring straight into a sun, and her skull split from the effort.

"No!" she said to Sylvie, although it came out as a shattered groan. She grabbed at the injector gun and clawed at Sylvie's arm, and she heard Sylvie cry out. Deirdre's body lashed as she tried to force the planetmind visions into her tiny human skull before they left her completely.

Come on come on come on...

The last bit of data blasted its way into her skull, and then she fell into a darkness.

* * *

She finally awakened in a haze of pain. She coughed, and that brought the attention of Sylvie, who appeared over her, bloody bandages stuck along her arm. She seemed unwilling to meet Deirdre's eyes.

"What happened?" asked Deirdre, but the memories came rushing back quickly.

"I'm not sure," said Sylvie quietly, but Deirdre was getting agitated again. She fought to catch her breath.

"Get me a touchpanel with a map of Planet!" she said. "Any surveyors' data we have of the other side of the sea, quickly!"

Sylvie looked at her with fear, but quickly scurried off and returned with the panel. "You need to rest, Lady," she said weakly.

Deirdre grabbed the panel and a stylus and looked carefully at the land on the far shore. There wasn't much information, just some long-range scans. She began marking locations carefully. "Here. And here." liny, careful X's. She didn't want to lose the information she had bought with such pain.

“What, Lady Skye?” asked Sylvie, still standing at a safe distance. Deirdre knew she should talk to Sylvie, apologize for the injury to her arm, tell her what she had seen. But she feared losing this information.

“I know where Yang lives,” she said.

And in a half-sleep later that day, as she tried to recover from an experience that had shaken her badly, she reflected on the other incident. Yang had somehow managed to send a thought projection into the planetmind, and she had somehow touched it. She had touched the raging passions that seethed below his tightly controlled mind.

* * *

In the Hive, Chairman Yang removed the goggles from the virtual world and disconnected the nerve spears from his skin. His experiment, to control physical pain through deep immersion in the virtual world, was intended as an exercise in meditation.

It had turned into something else. In fact, he could not shake the unsettling feeling that he had somehow committed a colossal error.

He rose from the nerve chair and wiped the sweat and small pricks of blood from his torso and legs, letting the events of the session sink in. He rang a small bell, and the doors to the room opened. Two attendants entered with folded robes, and he chose one and wrapped it around himself.

Lady Deirdre Skye.

Somehow his jaunt in the virtual world had taken a turn into an almost erotic experience, in which feelings burst within him while the face of that woman, in her younger and older visages, filled his mind. It was most unusual.

He linked to General Markos. “Are the transports ready to sail?”

“Of course, Chairman.”

“Let’s meet at the shore, then.”

Chairman Yang switched off the link and let his hand fall to his side. He felt tired, and suddenly wanted the attack on the far shore to be over. In an uncharacteristic failing of his will, he wondered if he really wanted Zakharov's treatments at all.

He sucked in twenty deep breaths, and the feeling passed, but a vestige of self-doubt still nagged at him. What had he been thinking?

He headed for the shore, his attendants following.

* * *

Rather than going overland, Yang decided to go to the shore through the warrens, which had been temporarily opened to facilitate the transport of goods out to the ships. On the way to the shore he passed the tunnel where the rebels had been slaughtered.

He stopped there, looking at the bloodstained floor at the choke point where the retreating rebels collided with those advancing. On the other side of the room the original transport ship bobbed. He was surprised to see a figure standing near the ship, her slim silhouette dwarfed by it. As he looked he could see her hand touching the side of the ship.

"Mia!"

To her credit she turned calmly, even though he had probably startled her. He walked toward her. She looked very elegant, with her hair swept up and held by jeweled pins.

"Hello, Father."

"What are you doing down here?"

"I heard you were going out to the shore, and I decided to wait for you." She looked up at the ship. "This is the ship the rebels wanted?"

"Yes." Her face looked calm, but he could see that she was deep in thought. "You're standing in the very room where most of the rebels were killed. It was an easy trap—their proximity to their goal

blinded them, making them susceptible to surprise. They paid the price with their lives.” He didn’t mention that Akim, also, had been taken in this very room.

“Just as you planned it.”

He nodded. “It wasn’t so difficult. They saw what they wanted to see.”

“And Jin Long was not the threat you imagined him to be?” She studied his face, and it made him uncomfortable. He supposed she was trying to reconcile the two visions of her father—the man who reared her, and the man who slaughtered hundreds of Hive citizens.

“Threat isn’t the right word...I suppose he wasn’t the *challenge* I imagined him to be.”

“Ah.” She smiled at that, as if her world had been made right. “But I’ve heard that his body wasn’t found among the dead.”

Yang turned and walked away from the ship, motioning her to follow him. “I won’t ask where you heard that. But it’s true we have no DNA profile on Jin, so it’s impossible to know if he was among the mutilated dead.”

“Did the rebels delete his DNA information from the datalinks, Father?”

“Apparently, yes.”

Mia nodded. “How clever of them.”

* * *

From the underground harbor Yang went up several sloping tunnels to the small spiritual retreat house called Seawatch. The doors had been widened and some windows taken out to facilitate the transfer of goods to the ships, requiring him to put on his pressure mask. Plastic crates loaded with equipment and weapons were stacked on the floor, and soldiers picked them up and carried them down to the shore.

“When can I cross the sea, Father?” He looked back to see Mia following him, her eyes shining with curiosity over her pressure mask.

She has the run of the Hive, access to the shore whenever she wants, more material goods than most citizens will see in their lifetime, but she still feels the urge for more. She reminds me of the danger of uncontrolled desire.

“When it’s safe to do so, Mia.”

He walked to the window and looked down to see four transport ships anchored off of the rocky beach, bobbing in the whitecapped water. General Markos stood on the beach, arms folded as he watched guards loading up small white tugs, which crossed from the beach to the ships.

Yang left the house with Mia and walked down sloping hills toward Markos, greeting him. “Did you know the rebel massacre occurred directly beneath the spot where you’re now standing, General?”

General Markos looked down at his feet without expression. “Pity for them.” Mia wandered away from them, toward the water. Markos gestured to the ships. “We’re almost loaded. All of the grafts on the shadow guard have been checked and rechecked, and the regular hiveguard are all your most loyal. They’ll do exactly what we want on the other side, with no danger of defecting.”

“Good,” said Yang. “When will the ships set sail?”

“One week, and then a week at sea. We’ll make it to the Gaian territories right on time.” He hesitated. “Do you have any fear of further rebel attacks while these soldiers are overseas?”

Chairman Yang smiled. “Hundreds of rebels died in the tunnels below us, and dozens more were cast into the mines. What do we have to fear from those?”

“There are no doubt more rebel sympathizers in the other bases. There were also rumors that a few made it into the river. Akim confirmed that in the sphere.”

“Akim would swallow an entire mindworm boil just to get five minutes of relief from the punishment sphere. If there are any rebels left, they’ll stay well hidden if they know what’s good for them. We can spare these soldiers.”

“If the rebels are well hidden, doesn’t that make them more dangerous than ever?”

Yang smiled. “Good thinking, General. But I’m not worried this time.” He gestured to the boats. “Good luck across the sea.”

“Yes, Chairman.” General Markos looked down the beach, where a hundred shadowguard stood in a perfect square, staring blankly across the waters.

Fourteen days later

Down below the four towers of Gaia’s High Garden ex-teams circled, their ranks swelled with more armored units from Morgan and Santiago. Missiles rocked the smallest tower, and as the hits came, pounding it like a hammer, a crack formed and split the rock. One of the base tiers tore free from the side of the tower, glass shattering and metal supports cracking like branches, until the entire tier hung by a few spindly support rods.

Gatling lasers streaked up from Spartan tanks, smashing into the high windows of the central tower. Gaian guerrillas, hidden deep in the xenofungus and fighting off hallucinations for a chance at disabling an enemy tank, closed up their survival packs and melted away from the deadly battlefield.

The ex-teams were advancing on the tower base when a ripple started in the xenofields, and the Morgan burn teams there suddenly dropped their weapons and ran. In the fields formed a huge mass of worms, the largest yet seen on the field, and it rose into a pillar as tall as the Gaian towers, sending a shadow across the battling forces.

Morganite soldiers collapsed in fright at the sight of the worms, or

turned their weapons on themselves, or simply froze into a catatonic state. Hardened Spartan warriors shouted with fear, and some jammed their own fingers into their eyes or turned their weapons on each other.

The ex-teams retreated, falling back to a position away from the towers, but another boil rose up from a tiny tongue of xenofungus and crushed the fleeing warriors. Then the worms sank into the xenofields as quickly as they came, leaving the bodies of Gaian enemies scattered across the red ground.

* * *

Morgan studied the course of the battle, his long black fingers pressed together. The reports came in rapid fire as the ex-teams fell one by one, overwhelmed by mindworm boils from fields to the west, and now even the more distant fields to the north.

“They’re moving together, I swear,” said Shani, bending over the map display inlaid into an elegant glass table. “This is a coordinated attack.”

“Exactly what we feared from the Gaians,” said Morgan. “They’re using the mindworms to destroy us. We need to step up our attacks.”

“The Council directive says that only examination teams...”

Morgan waved a hand at her. “We’ll call them examination teams, no matter how big they get. If we can end this quickly enough, no one will notice if a few rules were bent. We need to move our best troops in to end these counterattacks.”

“If we could get the leader, Lady Skye, it would demoralize the Gaians and win sympathy for a truce.”

Morgan nodded. “We’ve played nice with them so far. We don’t know where Lady Skye has hidden herself, but we do know that the towers at Gaia’s High Garden are her territory’s de facto center. Let’s destroy it.”

“Shall we move in with our best units, then?”

Morgan nodded. “Forget the mindworm attacks at home. We’ll have to absorb them. Put everything against the main towers, now, and tell Santiago to do the same.”

* * *

“They’re moving more units in!” Goldman appeared on her quicklink screen with a mixture of elation and fear. “The Spartans and Morganites are moving in more tanks and heavy artillery from the south and the east” The first shot streaked from the distance, a kilometer or more away, and struck the base’s impact shield, rocking the command center.

“Good,” said Deirdre. “Now hold out for all you are worth. Yang will be here shortly.”

Across the battlefield, night began to fall.

* * *

It was a Morganite examination team, shattered by a mindworm attack and huddled on a tall hill near the shore, that saw it first—the great black ship that sailed in from the sea. The ship drew near the shore, and pale white boats splashed down from its high decks, loaded with shadowy figures dressed in black.

The Morganite warriors huddled closer over a warming glowlight, their eyes hollow. One of them, Anadi, had managed to keep the group together, but he didn’t think they could go much farther this night. There were only five of them left, and they had seen their friends and comrades sink into a sea of writhing mindworms only hours before. Every shadow made him jump.

Anadi and his companions stared speechless as the small boats reached the shore and ground up onto the rocks, and then dark figures, dozens of them with strange weapons over their shoulders, slipped onto the beach like a wave. Most set off at a run toward the fighting, but some headed for Anadi’s group.

Anadi thought he should grab a weapon, or run, but he found himself paralyzed by fear and fatigue. Streaks of white fire crossed

the night from the approaching warriors, and Anadi felt the hot bite of pain in his thighs and then an excruciating agony in his left knee. He fell, and saw the others topple around him.

He rolled in the dirt, biting back cries of pain. Suddenly one of the shadow warriors loomed above him, a dark wrap around his face. The warrior pulled out an odd silver gun with a short barrel.

He felt a gloved hand on his throat, and then the silver gun came toward him. He heard a series of rapid chunking sounds, and felt tiny jaws biting into his flesh, and with each sound his agony increased a thousandfold.

* * *

Yang's warriors came from the west, and then from the northwest and southwest, converging on the High Garden. They came on foot like hungry ants on the red soil, or they came in small, fast rovers that dealt death with lasers and concussion missiles in perfectly coordinated attacks.

The tough Spartans moved with precision, and they fought hard and well, but the Hive warriors fought with a single-minded purpose and superior numbers that transcended the death of any individual soldier. Their warriors laid into the remnants of ex-teams already worn down by the mindworms. They came up behind Spartans who thought their retreat was covered and decimated them with precision attacks.

And wherever a fallen enemy still lived, a shadowy figure bent over him and filled his body with nerve staples, turning the victims from humans into creatures of metal and pain. The Spartans and Morganite warriors fled or were killed, leaving their vehicles and fellow soldiers behind as the Hive warriors advanced with ruthless efficiency.

The next day, when it was all over, there were no people left on the rolling hills of Gaia's territory. There were only corpses and equipment smoldering under the hot Centauri suns.

* * *

In the hallways of the abandoned base, Deirdre clicked off the video feeds and contacted Goldman. The flush of victory had been replaced by a deep coldness at the sight of the Morgan and Spartan soldiers, their bodies twisted on the landscape in attitudes of silent agony. Her own body shook as if in sympathy.

She punched a link to contact Goldman, and instead got Simper, his narrow face subdued.

“Did you see what they did?” he asked. He could barely speak. Deirdre saw someone in the command center behind him, choking back emotion.

“I saw. But it looks like we won.”

Simper nodded. “You’re right about that, Lady Skye.”

“I’m returning to the base, Simper. We’ll talk about it then. But where’s Goldman?”

Simper looked at her, surprised. “I guess no one told you,” he said.

“What?”

“Goldman is dead. He died of heart failure, while coordinating the battle.”

Deirdre felt her throat constrict, and she shook her head helplessly. “How? Was it the shock of the battle? Did he ignore his treatments?”

“His treatments?” Simper’s face clouded as he stared at her. “He gave his last half treatment to you, Lady Skye. Did you think we pulled it from the air?”

She stared at Simper, and suddenly the man vanished into a mist of her own tears. Deirdre shut off the link and bent over, holding her stomach, which now burned. Each time the pain receded she remembered something about Goldman—his strong face, or his voice over the quicklink, or any of a thousand other experiences they’d shared.

She sat in grief for an hour or more, until she felt utterly spent. And then she pulled her ravaged body up and headed out of the abandoned base, to return to the High Garden.

Chapter Ten

Deirdre took *Gaia One* from the abandoned base back to Gaia's High Garden. Victory had lost its pleasure after she learned of Goldman's death, and her senses were further dulled by what she saw when she arrived at the High Garden—xenofields and crops smoldering on scorched red hills, the twisted remains of her laboratory outbuildings, the bodies lying thick on the ground beneath the towers.

Gaia One stopped, and the pilot helped Deirdre out; she still felt as frail as old paper. She looked around the ravaged landscape, and then she narrowed her eyes, puzzled. Along the spines of distant hills, Yang's shadow warriors waited in loose formations.

"Hand me some binocs," she said, and the pilot obliged. She focused on the warriors, and saw that they were pouring small barrels of chemicals over dark figures on the ground.

"What are they doing?"

"They're destroying their dead," someone said. Deirdre looked up to see Simper walking toward her from the base of the main tower, his face pinched with anxiety.

"You've sent soldiers to check it out?"

"I have. They won't let us near them. They've also taken prisoners from the field and locked them on their ships." Simper stared at her for a long moment, and then he reached out a hand to her. "Is this really what you wanted?"

Deirdre stared at him. He looked distraught by the violence, and the more she thought about it, the more she shared his feelings. "We'll talk about it later," she said, releasing his hand. "How are things here?"

Simper turned and waved at the central tower. "I'll show you. Leave your pressure mask on unless you see rooms marked with the blue safety seal."

Simper took her into the central tower. The lifts were working, but she could hear them groaning as they reached the higher floors. When the doors opened Simper led her through once beautiful rooms that were now open to the sky and supported by twisted beams.

At one of these broken windows, she looked out again at the Hive warriors, now tiny dots on the hillsides. "Do you know what they're going to do now, Simper?"

"You tell me."

"I wonder." She stared at them for a moment more, remembering how they fought on the battlefield. She looked at Simper and gripped his arm lightly. "I never knew Yang to be a particularly religious person, or concerned about death in any way. Do you find it odd that they're literally dissolving the bodies of their dead?"

Simper shrugged. "I don't really know what to think."

"Will you help me find out?" He looked at her warily, but she squeezed his arm tighter. "I want to work together on this."

He nodded. "All right. I know some very resourceful scouts. I'll send them to try and find out what's going on."

"Get one of the bodies, if you can. Something's not right here."

"Indeed."

* * *

Lady Deirdre toured the base some more, and visited some injured citizens in the medlabs. There she saw young men and women, their faces scarred by fire or limbs severed by falling glass, and even a few who had been tortured by "rogue" Spartans. One whole room contained citizens who had been locked in a storage room pumped full of freezing vapors, eating away at their skin.

But even as she looked at her own citizens she thought again of those few brief glimpses of the fallen Morgan and Spartan warriors on the field, their backs arched in agony near burning xenofields.

From a pack at her hip a beeping started. It came from the touchpanel Yang used to communicate with her. "I need to answer this," she said to her attendants, and she went into a small office. The door had been knocked off its hinges, but she managed to wedge it closed and secure it.

She activated the touchpanel, and Yang's face appeared, flushed with victory. "Lady Deirdre," he said, nodding to her.

"Chairman. Do your people always torture the fallen?"

He arched an eyebrow. "That's no way to speak to an ally who has just freed your lands and your citizens."

"What were your soldiers doing out there, to the Morganites and Spartans?"

"We rendered them unfit to continue fighting. That was our plan."

Deirdre felt her heart pounding. "You massacred them! You tortured them on the field. That wasn't part of the plan."

"The plan was to break their will and get their weapons and vehicles. The Planetary Council will have to take me seriously now."

"The Council will consider you a murderer."

His dark eyes bored into her. "No, Lady Skye. They invaded your lands. They were the aggressors, and I was your ally. Now it's time to give them our demands."

"I won't attack them anymore if they reject your demands, Chairman. This has gone far enough."

Yang smiled. "I doubt any more violence will be necessary. Just remember that you got what you wanted, Lady Skye. Allow me to do the same."

His face vanished, and the touchscreen went dead.

* * *

Later that day, Deirdre sat hunched at a terminal in the command center, monitoring the endless buzzing of the diplomatic commlinks. Messages crossed between Lal and Santiago, Morgan and Zakharov, as they learned of Sheng-ji Yang's return to the settlements.

Deirdre answered no one, waiting for the other settlement leaders to absorb the reality of Yang's return, and his demand for consideration of a Council seat. She thought of her many options—to return to the empath chair, to ally with Yang and wreak further destruction on the settlements, to maintain neutrality in return for Council concessions. No path seemed clear, and so she waited.

A quicklink from Simper provided an end to the waiting. His face looked troubled on the screen. "Lady Skye, our scouts found the information you were looking for."

"Where are you?"

"In the labs. Don't eat before you get here—you won't be able to keep it down."

* * *

She hobbled to the labs. Franklin followed her; since Goldman's absence he had become her permanent security escort. When they reached the labs they were directed to a featureless back room, where Simper and two troubled-looking scientists stood over a pair of figures lying on long metal tables.

"What's this?" asked Deirdre. There was a smell of decay and fear in the room, and her stomach rolled over.

"The first is a Morganite prisoner," said Simper. "We found him and two others with a small group of Yang's warriors. Yang's warriors are dead now."

"I won't ask how." Deirdre approached the body gingerly. The

woman was alive, her back arched like the figures she had seen in the video feed. Her eyes were open, but she stared blankly at the ceiling, her mouth frozen in a silent scream.

All along her body, her armor had been punctured and torn away, and tiny ridges crisscrossed her flesh. Deirdre reached out and touched one.

“What are these?” she whispered.

Simper had backed away as Deirdre examined the body. He pointed to something on the table. “Look there.”

In a glass dish was a small silvery bracket, about the length of her thumb, covered with what looked like spun glass filaments that pulsed with light. It was smeared with blood. She picked up the dish, and the object shifted, clinking against the glass. Her hands shook as she set it down. “You took it from her?” she asked.

One of the scientists nodded. “It took five minutes to dig it out. There are hundreds of those things in her.”

“And how about this one?” she asked, motioning to the other body, a man wearing the simple armor of the Hive soldiers. He was tied to the table, and it didn’t look as if he was in pain even though blood clotted in his hair. His eyes stared at the ceiling vacantly. “What’s wrong with him?”

The scientist turned the man’s head and rapped the back of his neck with a forceps. Deirdre heard a clacking sound. “He’s got something in his skull.”

“Can you get it out?”

“We’re going to try. If not, I don’t think he’s going to tell us much.”

Simper pointed to the Morganite. “What about that one? What should we do?”

“Give her drugs, and try and get those metal things out. But work on the Hive warrior first. We need to talk to him.” Her body started to tremble uncontrollably, and the blood rushed from her head. The

horror of the room had gotten to her.

“Give her lots of drugs,” she said, and left the room.

* * *

It was nightfall when Deirdre got the message to return to the labs. She went down quickly, through cold and deserted hallways where makeshift scaffolding stood in for permanent repairs.

The Morganite soldier had been removed from the lab room, to Deirdre’s relief. The scientist stood over the other table, where the Hive soldier lay. Against one wall Simper waited, nodding to Deirdre.

Before the Hive soldier had looked like a heartless automaton; he now looked like a terrified young man. Bright eyes looked up at the ceiling, and his chest rose and fell rapidly. His arms and legs were still bound.

“We got it out,” said the scientist, holding up an odd metal disc with a pair of forceps. The young man spasmed on the table, and the scientist glanced at some monitors. “It wasn’t pretty. This thing was pushed into his brain.”

The young man shook, and Deirdre stepped forward, leaning over his face. Sweat beaded his forehead, but there was awareness in his eyes. He looked as if he was in great pain.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Like...shit...” His words came in hitching gasps.

“What is this thing we took from your head?”

“Experiment. Neural...graft,” he said. He moved his wrists in the restraints. “Please,” he said. “Let me...sit.”

“Release him.” Deirdre stepped back, and the scientist unbound the man’s arms and helped him sit up. The young man hung his head, trying to steady his breathing. A trail of blood ran from the back of his head down his chest.

“Listen,” he gasped. He reached a hand out for Deirdre suddenly, and she nearly collapsed under the weight. “There are rebels in the Hive. I was one.” He looked as if he were staring through her. “Our leader’s name is Jin. This...” He reached up and touched the back of his head. “I joined rebels. Yang found out. *Jin...*”

He brought his hand back, and Deirdre saw that it was smeared with blood. The man started to jerk, and the scientist shouted in alarm. “Something’s happening to him. Lay him down!”

The man went into full spasms, thrashing on the table, a froth appearing at his lips. Deirdre faded back to the wall as the scientist moved in, putting pressure on the wound at the back of the man’s skull.

He had dropped the neural graft in his panic. Deirdre saw it on the floor, a featureless gray disc, smeared with blood.

* * *

Lady Deirdre Skye didn’t go to the emergency Council meeting in person. She linked in from the High Garden, sending a rich holographic projection to the Council hall at UNHQ. Chairman Yang prepared to do the same from his bases across the sea, even as his elite troops remained camped on hillsides near the shore.

As soon as she linked in, her image floating above her regular seat at the Council table, she was able to receive video feeds of the rest of the Council. Santiago sat as rigid as ever, but her fingers twitched on the Council table, and she had a fixed, faraway look. Morgan slumped a little and dabbed his face with a white cloth. Zakharov’s eyes darted everywhere, as if trying to figure out what variable had gone wrong in his master equation.

Pravin opened the meeting, sitting taller than the others. “Lady Deirdre Skye, you have come before us to lay claim to the land east of your territory, and to reintroduce Executive Officer Yang to the Council.”

“Bring him in,” said Santiago. “There’s no point continuing without Yang here.”

Lady Deirdre shrugged and fired off a signal to Yang. In the center of the chamber, in front of the Council table, his image shimmered into existence.

“Executive Officer Yang,” said Pravin. Zakharov shook his head.

“We thought you were long dead,” said Santiago.

“I’m alive and well, Santiago. You know I don’t surrender easily.”

“We’ve read the information you linked us, about your request to join Council and your bases across the sea,” said Zakharov. “But you left many things out. For example, would you like to explain how you’ve managed to develop your own life-extending technologies, Executive Officer Yang?”

“It’s Chairman Yang, as you are now Academician Zakharov,” said Yang. He looked at each of the Council members steadily. “I have my own scientists and my own infrastructure, and that’s all you need to know for now. I’m not approaching you in supplication. I’m here to ask one question: Will you give me a position on your Council, or not?”

“What’s in it for us?” asked Santiago.

“I have half of your weapons, and I have Lady Deirdre Skye as an ally. I have my own army of loyal citizens, and I control all of the lands across the sea. I should be asking what you will do for me.”

“A lot, if it comes down to that,” said Zakharov. “My new gene bath technology, for one. It will extend your life painlessly and perhaps for hundreds of years. You and Lady Skye both look like you could use it.”

“Ah,” said Yang, and Zakharov’s lips curled into a smile.

“And don’t think you’ve seen the last of our military technologies,” said Santiago. “You caught us off guard this time...”

“You got sloppy, Colonel,” said Yang. “But I’m not here to conquer you. Though Deirdre Skye and I have crippled your armies, I still want to work together with you.”

“But you want a Council seat,” said Pravin. “When you haven’t helped build the settlements, or supported any of our efforts.”

“It’s time to start,” said Yang. “But I won’t be a lackey. I want full rights and power on your Council, and trade agreements with Morgan and Zakharov. Otherwise I must return to my bases and reconsider my offer.”

Deirdre felt a prickling in her spine. First Yang had sent in his warriors to slaughter her opponents, and now he talked about opening trade with Morgan and Zakharov, along with a veiled threat of war against them?

Pravin let out a deep breath. “You’ve entered our lands with violence, Chairman. You’ve killed scores of our soldiers...”

“The cost of your mistake,” said Yang. “It was you who invaded Lady Skye’s territory.”

Pravin shook his head. “I want to see your lands, and your people. Personally, I want to know more about you and what you’ve been doing. Why don’t we visit your bases, across the sea?”

Yang fixed him with a steady stare. “You would come to the Hive, with the rest of the Council?”

“Under escort, of course,” said Pravin. “We would all come with soldiers, and we would want some of your soldiers to remain here at UNHQ as a guarantee of our safety.”

“I have no further quarrel with you,” said Yang. Deirdre could sense his excitement growing even though he kept a calm façade. “You would have every guarantee of safety.”

Pravin nodded and glanced at the others. “We’ll work out the details, then.”

Yang nodded. “We must all try and be friends.”

* * *

Deirdre stopped her transmission when the long Council meeting

had finally ended. They would all be going to Yang's main Hive base in one week, with escorts, on separate ships. She thought Yang would want to keep his lands secret, but he seemed almost eager for them to visit, which worried her.

She had a long dinner and soaked her tired muscles in a hot bath, using the lush recreation commons since her own chambers had been destroyed during the attacks. She found she enjoyed the steam rising from the water, and the laughing of the other Gaians around her, and the fresh smell of the hybrid trees growing around the hot springs. It made her feel connected to her people again.

Later that evening, she linked to Pravin Lal. He answered immediately this time, and in person. Though he still looked bowed by sorrow and responsibility, Deirdre could see a youthful glow to his skin that made her think of the genetic treatments again.

"Have you spoken to the other Council members?" she asked.

Pravin nodded. "Deirdre, I know that Sheng-ji is your ally now, but when I see the video feeds from the battle..." He shook his head. "I can scarcely watch them. His soldiers were as ruthless as the Spartans and as efficient as the Morganites."

"I know." Deirdre fell silent, waiting for Pravin to say something, wondering if he would bury his convictions in a labyrinth of protocol.

Instead, color rose in his cheeks. "I think we need to hold him accountable. If that makes you my enemy, forgive me now, but the Council can't be strong-armed."

Deirdre smiled, and even felt a hint of the planetmind's warmth bloom inside her. "Well, I hope we've learned something, Pravin. I want my land back, and some other concessions."

Pravin nodded. "I've spoken to the others, and you've made your point. Besides, Morgan has little fight left in him." He looked at her seriously. "But you will have to accept compromises on overall settlement mining and production."

She felt the heat of the planetmind in her belly, and thought again of the tiny humans driving their nails into Planet's limitless skin, and what Planet could do to them. She smiled. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"As for Yang, no one trusts him."

"Why should you?" She thought of the Hive warrior in her labs, and the metal disc pulled from the back of his head. "Are all the settlement leaders going across the ocean to visit the Hive?"

"We're all going. We need everyone, in case things go badly over there."

"Good. Because I know where his bases are, all five of them. I'm going to send you the information, as soon as the Council has turned the disputed territory back over to me, and as soon as I get the shipment from Zakharov."

Pravin nodded slowly. "I'll look forward to it, Deirdre. And Zakharov sent the shipment already. Several doses."

"Thank you. Lady Skye out."

She dosed the link and sat at the touchscreen, feeling very old, but peaceful nonetheless.

* * *

The next day a sealed transport arrived from Zakharov, under guard. Sylvie had the crates carried down to the secure labs, and there she oversaw the unpacking and assembling of the contents.

Deirdre waited in her chambers, where thick transparent plastic now masked her shattered windows, and waited for the call. When it came she looked out over the xenofungus for several long minutes, trying to experience and remember the feeling of this aged body sitting and watching the world. She blinked and experienced the watery feeling of her eyes, and the way her skin seemed to hang loose against her brittle bones, and the pains that stabbed her in random places for no reason.

This is what it means to be old.

She got up and descended below the ground, into a secure wing of the biolabs. Sylvie met her and ushered her past several guards and into a locked room.

“Here it is,” said Sylvie. Set in the floor was a glass tank with all manner of wires and tubes attached to it, along with a grid that dispersed an electric energy through the substance inside. Deirdre could smell the heavy charged energy of the air, and the stimulating essence of the liquid in the gene bath, which was thick and white, like milk.

“How long will I be in there?” she asked.

“Several days.” Sylvie shifted uneasily. “There is one thing, though—according to Zakharov’s scientists you don’t use a rebreather in the tank. You have to inhale the fluids, so that they can circulate in your body. You essentially die in the tanks, and then emerge all fixed up, I guess.”

Deirdre nodded. “It sounds better than the old way.” She looked at Sylvie, and saw that she had begun to cry, water brimming over in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s this thing,” said Sylvie. She gestured to the tank, and to the swirling white milk that seemed to vibrate with hidden power. “It’s eternal life, I think. It’s what we’ve been searching for.”

“An eternity of strung-together moments isn’t what we’re searching for,” said Deirdre. “That’s not it at all.” But of course it sounded hypocritical, coming from her. She cleared her throat. “How many doses will you use?”

“Three, which is all we have right now. Your body has been damaged, but this...” She pointed to it again. “This is the best Zakharov has ever done. It’s better than anything they used back on Earth.”

“Okay.”

Deirdre slipped out of her robe and undergarments, and took off her

jewelry. She walked over to the tank, and Sylvie guided her.

“Step in and lie in the tank. When you’re ready, tell me. We’ll have to restrain you when you go under. You’ll fight against breathing the liquid, and then lose consciousness. We’d drug you to sleep, but we can’t have the drugs circulating in your system.”

“Okay.” She looked down at her naked body, at its loose skin, and had a wholly unexpected reaction. She realized she would miss this body in certain ways, the way it slowed her down and forced her to deliberate, the way it smoothed her reckless edges and helped her to appreciate each action, and each moment. She felt as if she were losing a friend.

An old friend. She smiled at that.

Sylvie put pressure on her arm to guide her, thinking perhaps that she was hesitating from fear. Deirdre mounted the rubber step that led to the tank and turned her body past a heavy piece of equipment that dangled there. She put her foot into the milky substance and watched it vanish.

“It’s cold,” she said, catching her breath. Sylvie just nodded.

She put her other leg in and then slowly sat down, feeling the icy liquid on her skin, sliding up her legs and to her waist and belly. Her heart was pounding, and she felt the urge to cry again.

What if she didn’t wake up? What if this was the end of her life? With Goldman gone, would anyone miss her?

“I want to hook to the planetmind,” she said. “When I’m in recovery, hook me up for a little while.”

“Okay,” said Sylvie. “For a moment. But if anything happens...”

“Of course,” said Deirdre. She looked down at the old body again, as her belly disappeared, and her chest and arms, and then only her head floated above the surface of milk. “It’s all right,” she said.

Sylvie flipped a lever, and a large padded arm descended into the water and pressed against Deirdre’s upper torso. She felt a relentless

pressure for a moment, then it stopped, the servos quieting. Sylvie kept her arm on the lever.

“Ready?” asked Sylvie. “It will go easier for you if you breath in sooner. Just let go.”

“Yes,” said Deirdre, and closed her eyes.

The arm pushed her down, beneath the waters, and Deirdre felt her body start to thrash. She opened her eyes again and saw nothing but a pale white glow. Her lungs screamed, and she fought to control her heart and her body and her instincts.

Let it go.

She opened her mouth and inhaled, and the icy liquid rushed in. She tried to cry out and thrashed again, but now it was all liquid, no air, going in or out. She felt her head spin and her life slipping away, as if she were dying, and then darkness covered her and switched off her mind.

* * *

She was aware of time, a vast time, a void that she had passed through, with no idea of how large that void was, only a sense that it had been long and deep and unknowable.

She floated now in a soft light, and her skin felt warm and alive. Exultation lifted in her breast, a pure joy, unconnected to any circumstance or self-perception.

Deirdre Skye.

She felt that thought-voice inside her, and she knew it was the planetmind that cradled her. It seemed loving now, as if it sensed her vulnerability and sought to nourish her.

“Hello,” she said, with her thoughts, supporting it with a burst of emotion that said *welcome*, as if her heart lifted at the sight of a lover.

A *welcome* feeling came back to her, tickling her insides.

The soft light began to lift a little, revealing some of the planetmind, but it did not expose the full extent of the vastness out there.

I don't want to damage you, said the thought-voice, in its vocabulary of constructed emotions. *But humanthings are hurting me.*

"I know."

Help me.

Another thought sequence reached her, this one complex with layers of meaning. Deirdre could read in them the growing fear and hatred of the human presence that cut into its skin. Deirdre considered her own experience, putting the best she had seen of humanity on one side of a balance and every vile and hurtful act on the other—the fresh smell of her gardens against the relentless self-absorption of the leaders, the horrors of war against a forgotten childhood toy. It was clear which way the balance tipped.

"I'll help you," said Deirdre.

She floated back in that soft world, letting it soothe her. She rested in timelessness.

* * *

She awakened with a shock, back to a room that was dark and small. She was bent over the edge of the bath and vomiting large quantities of icy water out of her stomach and lungs.

When she was done she leaned back, gasping for breath, still inside the tank. Gradually she became aware of several faces, looking on with concern and wonder from the edges of the room.

She shook her head, then touched her hair, which was plastered down against her neck and face.

It was black and smooth.

She looked around again. She was sitting in the tank, the icy white liquid up to her chest, and she saw that her skin was smooth and

pale, and young. She felt tight and alive, as if she had been given a new body, a flawless body, untouched by age.

“My...God...”

Slowly she rose, looking down at her body as it emerged from the white waters. Out came breasts firm and full with youth, and a smooth stomach, and firm hips and tight, strong legs. And all of it felt wonderful, even with the cold liquid running off her, even with the dim light in the room.

She held up her hands, and she looked at the scientists around her, who stood with shocked, open faces. She touched her own face, and then she began to cry, deep, sobbing cries.

* * *

Soon after, Deirdre submitted herself to a quick medical exam by Sylvie. Sylvie took her blood pressure, peered into her eyes, took tissue samples from around her body.

“You’ve essentially reverted back to a healthy adult body,” said Sylvie. “We’ll let your doctor do the extensive tests, but you seem about thirty-four Earth years old.”

“But I feel even better,” murmured Deirdre, staring at her pale arms.

“Cellular damage was repaired, things like scars and small imperfections in muscles and joints.” Sylvie stopped suddenly and put down an instrument with a clatter. “Lady, I must ask...when can I use the bath?”

Deirdre looked at her blankly. “Use the bath?” “You took three, Lady. I’ve been loyal to you.” “Loyal.” Deirdre thought of loyalty, but what did that mean, really? The vastness of the planetmind had no concept of loyalty, because it encompassed everything in the world. It was loyal only to the process of life, and the planetmind was bigger than anything. She found herself looking at Sylvie strangely. “Does that matter?”

Sylvie’s mouth opened in surprise, and then her voice shook with

anger. “Of course it matters! I’m getting older, Lady. You can’t keep it all to yourself.” She wiped her eyes and turned away.

Deirdre stared at Sylvie, waiting for her to get control of her emotions. Instead the young woman wiped her eyes several more times and then walked out of the room.

How...petty.

Deirdre thought about the bath again, and about the new energy pulsing through her body. Part of it was youth, but part of it was the planetmind, bound up with her thoughts during her recovery. The planetmind had a reserve of energy as vast and deep as the whole world, and the planetmind was not petty.

The planetmind just wanted to live, without the scourge of buzzing humans that swarmed its back. Thinking about that, Sylvie seemed very small to Deirdre, and not at all deserving of the eternal life that pulsed in the milky bath.

One week later

The settlement leaders arrived on Yang’s shores with an impressive show of force. Transports arrived with hundreds of troops in Gaian, Peacekeeper, Spartan, Morganite, and University uniforms. Spartan needlejets took off from a carrier and swept the horizon, until a representative from Yang demanded that they desist. When Lady Skye and the others stepped onto the rocky shore, they felt the weight of an army at their backs.

Chairman Yang didn’t meet them, but a beautiful young woman in close-fitting red robes did. She took each of their hands graciously while a dozen or so Hive citizens waited behind her, all of them dressed in featureless gray-green uniforms.

“Welcome,” she said, bowing. “My name is Mia, and I am Chairman Yang’s daughter. My father hopes your journey was pleasant. He’ll be meeting you later, when we eat, but first I’ll be happy to give you a tour.”

Deirdre nodded. She felt fresh and alive, her new body pulsing with youth, which gave her an odd connection with this woman who was one hundred forty years her junior. She smiled at her and tried to engage the woman in further conversation, but Mia, while gracious, addressed her remarks to all of the Council leaders.

They walked up a slope to a small house set into a hillside and barely visible from below. There they were seated and given tea in small cups. Deirdre drank slowly, enjoying the taste but well aware that it did not stack up to her best hybrids. Morgan kept his face carefully neutral.

“This table is damaged,” said Zakharov, rubbing the corner of the stone table, where a large chunk was missing.

Mia nodded. “I regret the damage, Provost. We moved heavy equipment through here a few weeks ago. Please excuse us.”

Morgan grunted, and Deirdre realized that the “heavy equipment” was probably the equipment of war.

After tea Mia led them to a convoy of rovers, which took them and their escorts across the barren surface. Deirdre and the others watched out the window, and she reflected that, despite any other faults, Yang kept the world as pure as the time before any humans had touched the surface.

The rovers arrived at the Hive. Broad metal doors swung open in a hillside, and the rovers parked inside a large bay. They all climbed out, and Santiago’s face hardened as the doors slammed shut behind them.

“Welcome to the Human Hive,” said Mia. She gestured elegantly to a tunnel mouth at the far side of the bay, where two impassive guards stood at attention. They went to the tunnel, but before they entered Santiago stopped.

“This is a narrow tunnel. Where are we going?”

Mia addressed her calmly. “This is the fastest way into the center of this base. You’re welcome to bring your escorts, but you have my

father's pledge that nothing will happen to you."

"Let's go, then," said Morgan. "Santiago, you're too jumpy."

"It's an underground base," said Mia apologetically. "We must use tunnels at some point."

Santiago motioned to the escorts, who preceded them into the tunnels. Then Mia led them down a long tunnel, and deeper into the Hive.

"How many bases do you have?" Deirdre asked, looking around at the glowlights shining in the darkness.

"We have three, including this one," said Mia. "My father will fill you in on the details."

"Three bases," said Deirdre. "Fascinating."

They walked through tunnels that became wider and cleaner, and began to pass citizens who didn't acknowledge the visitors with even the turning of a head. The citizens were all dressed in simple clothes and walked with a measured gait.

"What do your people do for entertainment?" asked Morgan, appraising a group of the humorless workers.

"We have a well-regarded media channel. We also play games, do physical exercises, and talk and drink together. We pride ourselves on our physical strength and our unity," said Mia.

"Perhaps we can export you some of our cutting-edge media and gaming properties," said Morgan. "That could be to our mutual benefit."

"My father would have to discuss that with you," said Mia evenly. Morgan pursed his lips.

She showed them some of the well-lit, open refreshment bars where Hive citizens could order food and drink in exchange for credit chits. She showed them some of their laboratories, full of an odd mix of out-of-date equipment and ultramodern instruments. They

saw some of the clean, compact living quarters of Hive citizens, and Mia showed them that there were no locks on the doors. Morgan chuckled at that.

Then they were brought to a sparse but beautiful garden, which Deirdre found pleasing to the eye but devoid of much life, and from there to the central shaft, where citizens walked and played games at small tables. Morgan and Zakharov stood at the railing and looked up the great shaft and then down.

“Impressive,” said Zakharov. “What are the dimensions?”

“Ninety meters around and four hundred deep,” said Mia. “My father helped design the special drills that hollowed out the shaft.”

“Are your mining facilities down there?” asked Morgan, looking into the black depths.

Mia nodded. “Some of them.”

“Impressive integration,” said Zakharov. “Your people can work in the mines and then come right up to their living facilities. Assuming they like living underground.”

“They do,” said Mia. “Let’s continue, please.”

They followed her. Deirdre felt a peace and safety she hadn’t expected in this underground world, although when she looked at the citizens’ faces she saw mostly blank looks and the occasional furtive glance. She wondered what they were all afraid of.

“Ah, here we are,” said Mia, stopping at a set of double doors trimmed in a golden metal. Deirdre looked at the doors, and saw the engravings of dragons twisting around their perimeter. “Chairman Yang will join us here.”

* * *

They entered to find a large hall with a high, curved ceiling and tapestries on the walls. At one end of the room a large ink painting of a Centauri hillside dominated the wall, somehow elegant in its sparseness.

In the center of the room was a large table carved from a dark red stone and surrounded by intricately carved wooden chairs. In front of each chair was a place setting, set with golden dishes, tall glasses, and a small vase with a sprig of flowering plant. The room felt very warm, unpleasantly so, and Deirdre felt herself sweating already.

“Please sit down,” said Mia, motioning them in with a suddenly radiant smile. “Your escorts will have to wait around the sides of the room, I’m afraid.”

Deirdre found a place set with a green vase and a red rose, the colors of her Gaian symbol. She looked around to see similar settings for the others, such as a gold vase with a jet-black branch for Morgan, the same colors as his symbol. She wondered again just how much Yang knew of their activities, and how long he had watched them.

She sat down with the others, scraping her chair along the floor.

“I assume that wood is valuable, in an underground facility such as this,” said Morgan. “Where do you grow it?”

“It’s quite valuable, but most of the wood in the Hive is of poor quality. It’s only for guests that we bring out our best,” said Mia, then suddenly she looked around as if she had heard a signal. “Chairman Yang,” she said simply.

From a doorway behind the ink drawing stepped Chairman Yang in robes of blue and silver. He walked forward at a steady pace, his robes shimmering in the soft light of the room, until he reached the head of the table. He nodded to each of them, and when he looked at Deirdre he held her gaze.

“Welcome to all of you. Lady Skye, the treatments have done wonders for you.” He lifted a glass. “Please, let’s drink.”

“One moment,” said Zakharov. He nodded to one of his escorts, who went to each place setting and waved a small device over it.

“We don’t mean any offense,” said Pravin to Yang, and Yang

nodded. Finally they lifted their glasses.

“To the settlements, and human life on Chiron,” said Yang, and they drank.

* * *

They ate course after course, each dish brought out on delicately painted and carved dishes decorated with Earth and Chiron native animal life. Each dish seemed more fragrant and exotically spiced than the last, and Deirdre felt herself getting full even as the heat in the room made her feel sluggish. She drank cool glasses of water between courses, and watched the servers, who seemed like servants with their deferential manner.

“How do you like what I’ve built here?” asked Chairman Yang, as the last course came out, a kind of light custard. Deirdre was somewhat alarmed to see the white dishes decorated with yellow carvings of mindworms.

“It’s quite a feat of engineering to build such extensive networks under the ground,” said Zakharov. “Why did you do it?”

“For the safety of my citizens, and to create a world where moral fiber and good work enrich the lives of all citizens, with no outside distractions. Of course the workers are issued passes, and can visit the outside whenever they like. They particularly enjoy the shore.”

“They certainly keep it immaculate,” said Pravin. “The beach, I mean.”

“Of course,” said Yang. “We all truly see this new world as a fresh start, as Lady Skye has often pointed out.”

“As members of the human settlements we’ll support and assist each other,” said Morgan. “There is trade and exchange of ideas and resources as well, when needed. Why have you taken so long to reveal yourself to us?”

Yang looked at him coolly. “Did your soldiers enter Lady Skye’s territories to support and assist her?”

“There are conflicts, of course,” said Morgan. “That’s why we need to be careful.”

“Look around,” said Yang. “I have two more bases, almost as large as this. I can be the arm of the settlements on this shore. I can expand the human presence on Chiron, in return for a position on your Council and minimal assistance from Director Morgan and Academician Zakharov.”

“Do you intend to keep your policies in place, such as building all your bases underground?” asked Pravin.

Morgan chimed in, “Frankly, I think your people need to lighten up a little. I have some highly immersive game and entertainment venues that would benefit the Human Hive greatly. You’d be demonstrating your openness to us...”

“My people already live in the best of all possible worlds,” said Yang. “We have a lifestyle that makes us quite comfortable.” He moved back his chair and stood. “We’ll work out these details in time. You mentioned entertainment, Director Morgan, and I’d like to show you how we entertain ourselves in the Hive.”

Deirdre rose with the others to follow him, well aware that he had answered none of their questions. As they exited through a different door, Deirdre lingered, watching the eerily silent attendants carefully set the dirty dishes in large wooden trays.

* * *

Yang brought them through several more chambers and finally to one that was small and bare. In the center sat a ring of comfortable chairs covered in red cloth. By each one rested a pair of elaborate goggles.

“This is some of the technology I can share with you,” said Yang. “You’ll find it fascinating, and unlike anything you’ve experienced in the settlements.”

“What is it?” asked Zakharov, curiosity warring with distrust on his face.

"I call it the virtual world. It's a true communal utopia, where scenes and sounds and feelings are projected from your mind into a collaborative space and back again. You can literally live in an alternate reality."

"Interesting," said Morgan. "How do your citizens access this?"

"They're issued passes to special recreation areas," said Yang. "We issue passes to limit people's time of exposure, since it's quite an addictive experience."

"Fascinating," said Morgan.

Yang walked over and donned a pair of the goggles, and a young attendant appeared from nowhere to attach sensors to his fingers and temples. Yang flipped a switch, and then his body relaxed.

"Come join me," he said, and his face twitched into a variety of expressions as he looked into the world behind the glasses. "There is nothing to fear in here. It's simply a sensory projection, and you can leave with the flip of a switch."

Morgan came over first, nodding to his escorts to watch him. Zakharov followed, and then Pravin and Santiago. As they entered the virtual world, their bodies relaxed, and then sounds of amazement issued from them.

Deirdre sat in a chair, skeptical of anything that could match the experience of being inside the planetmind. She put on the goggles and felt the attendant attach the sensors, and then she flipped the switch.

The world opened up, and she found herself in the planetmind again.

* * *

The planetmind swept around her, vast and pulsing with life. She was aware of her Deirdre self again, and also a sense of puzzlement from the planetmind at her unfamiliar entry through the gateway of the virtual world.

This is not where I'm supposed to be. She couldn't find any sign of the others.

She floated for a while in the planetmind, but her deirdrebody remained aware that she had gated in through a strange projection device and had lost the others. But at the periphery of her awareness she could sense small things, odd feelings and images that tugged at her and wouldn't go away.

She tried to float toward them, but they were not really in the space of the planetmind, and she began to wonder if these things were her fellow humans, inside the virtual world.

Let me go there. She pushed the thought into the planetmind, while simultaneously directing the planetmind toward that tiny corner of awareness that deirdrebody inhabited. *Please.*

The planetmind seemed to sigh and shift, what passed for cognition rippling across the nodes and tendrils of fungus and worm.

Suddenly Deirdre felt herself on the absolute knife blade of awareness. She was now Deirdre, inside her body and suddenly inside Yang's virtual world. And she was the planetmind, as vast and powerful as ever.

The Deirdre self inhabited the mass hypnosis of the virtual world, where a multitude of human minds whirled around one another. There was Morgan, sending streamers of gold and silver across the shimmering background of this virtual mindspace. He suddenly sensed her and chased her, whipping golden streamers past her projected self, and she felt cool golden fingers clutching at her. But she turned to him and let just a touch of the planetmind through, and he stopped cold. She heard a grunt somewhere nearby.

She sailed on through the hallucinogenic space. There was Pravin, building an image of something large, but with a soft feminine presence she could not place. It was a tower, but it was a woman, a mother and a wife. The structure began to rise up in the background of the virtual world.

She turned away from it, and then there was something upon her,

something focused and pure and agile, whipping around her virtual self. She touched this thing and suddenly saw her own projection through it—a rolling mist of gold and green light. Then she shifted back into her own awareness, and this thing was on her, black and red and sleek. It was Sheng-ji Yang, and now he tumbled into her.

He's trying to force himself into my mind.

She recoiled at the intrusion, and the planetmind gathered itself, ready to protect her. Yang pushed in, and before Deirdre could stop it the planetmind had opened, revealing itself to the Yang projection for a single instant. Yang stopped cold, shocked into stillness, reduced to a small dot in a world both vast and unexpected. Deirdre suddenly realized that he had seen the planetmind in all its power, and she frantically threw herself into him, trying to hide the planetmind.

There was a flash of a vision, two bodies in space, herself and Yang, and she felt the intense pleasure of deep connection. She stayed in that place for a long moment, his passion feeding hers in a massive feedback loop, washing her in pleasure. They tumbled through an infinite space. Then she remembered who he was, and she shouted and felt her own hands tear the goggles from her head.

She was alone, in a dark room, with empty chairs around her. The others were gone.

Chapter Eleven

Franklin stepped from the shadows behind her, his jaw tight. A short, small-boned attendant shadowed him.

“Lady, we thought this damn thing had knocked you out cold.” He looked everywhere, and his hand kept straying to his belt. “They took my weapon, but I made them let me stay.”

“Franklin.” Lady Deirdre stared at him with wide eyes, her mind still adrift in the world she had just left. “Thank you...” Her voice trailed off, and she stood up.

“Think nothing of it.” Franklin watched her carefully. “Are you all right, Lady Skye? Did he do something to you?”

“No. I just go too deeply into these experiences sometimes. It’s just like the empath chair back home.”

“Well, you sure frightened the others. Yang had to do some fast talking, asked if you’d ever been under hypnosis. Finally he got everyone to retire to their rooms.”

The small-boned man edged up next to them, and Franklin stared at him. “I guess that’s where we need to go, too.”

The little man nodded, but as he lowered his head Deirdre thought his eyes followed her for a moment too long, imploring her. She remembered the rebel soldier from the High Garden, lying on a metal table in her labs. That soldier had died before he could tell them anything more, but she remembered the name he had mentioned, *fin*.

She touched the attendant so that he looked up at her. His face now seemed blank and childlike, but a moment ago... “Jin,” she said, so quietly it was more a breath than a word.

The man touched his fingers with his lips, just for a moment. Deirdre looked at Franklin.

“Let’s go,” she said. From the shadows one of Yang’s guard appeared, as Deirdre suspected he might. She didn’t think Yang would let this one attendant guide them through his base.

The four of them left the room together, and the door closed behind them of its own accord.

* * *

The attendant took her down broad hallways and then smaller hallways, and then to a lift that took them down, though she didn’t know how far because there were no indicators to show what level the lift was on or how deep it went.

She looked at the attendant and the silent guard as the lift carried them deeper into the ground, and she felt a sudden urge to run for it, to find their way out of this place and back to the ships. But then the lift opened onto a network of large but utterly featureless hallways.

“Your chambers are this way,” said the attendant, and led her around two bends to a wide doorway set flush in the wall. Another guard waited outside, and opened the door as he saw them approach.

“I hope you’ll find these quarters sufficient,” said the attendant. “The guard will remain posted outside for your protection.”

Behind the door was a series of lushly appointed chambers with beautifully carved wooden furniture and colored tapestries covering the stone walls. Deirdre’s other Gaian escorts waited inside, pacing nervously. Everything seemed quiet and secure.

“Where are the other Council members?” she asked.

“On this level and the ones above. You can contact them through those touchpanels.” He gave Lady Deirdre a slight bow. “We’ll send the food and drink you asked for.”

She hadn't asked for anything, but she nodded. "Thank you."

"Good night."

The door closed behind him.

An hour or so later, Lady Deirdre sat in a plush chair, sinking deep into the yielding fabric. A wineglass rested on the narrow glass table next to her; she had found the wine in a small cabinet set into the wall. No one had arrived with any food or drink yet.

She stared at the wine, which was a pale red color. Behind an elaborately carved screen patterns of artificial moonlight shifted, and the effect was quite beautiful, almost mesmerizing.

"Did you say there was food coming, Lady Skye?" Deirdre looked at Franklin, who paced the room like a caged tiger.

"I believe so."

"I never heard you ask for any." He looked over at the touchscreen set into a small lacquered table.

"Maybe that thing is hooked into the kitchens." "Try it." She stared at the touchscreen. The wine had sent her mind floating above the day's tensions, and she was curious to know if any food was coming, or any rebels, or both.

Franklin shrugged and sat down at the touchscreen. "Food, dammit," he ordered, and sighed in exasperation as the touchpanel failed to parse his cursing properly.

"These are civilized people, Franklin," said Deirdre with a smile.

Franklin shook his head and punched a command to link to the kitchens. He quickly accessed a guest menu rich with exotic-sounding foods. "A lot of mushrooms on this menu," he said, and punched in some random orders.

Just as he finished a buzzing came from the door. He looked over in surprise. "Enter," said Deirdre.

The door opened, and a young woman entered, holding a covered tray. With the guard peering into the room from behind her, she crossed straight to Deirdre and lifted the cover off the tray with a dancer's grace.

"Will this do, Lady Skye?" she asked in a soft voice.

She looked at the tray. There was a small green vase with a red xenofungus tubule, and a bowl filled with a fragrant brown soup. Tiny bundles of some kind of translucent noodle rested next to the bowl, and then there was a long dish containing a number of tiny red budlike fruits.

The red buds spelled the word *go*.

"OK," she said, confused. The woman set the tray down, and the fruits shifted, wiping out the message. The attendant turned and left without another word.

* * *

It took Yang all of his control and self-discipline to maintain his calm in front of his subordinates. They reviewed the spools from the virtual world carefully, analyzing the thought patterns of each visiting leader, but it was Deirdre Skye whom he was thinking about.

"Director Morgan we all saw as focused on wealth, bright colors, and his own ego," said his head analyst, a slender man with heavy glasses. "The more detailed psych readouts are being generated now."

The lead analyst and his five team members, three men and three women total, all had been in the virtual world in cloaked mode, dissecting every behavior of the settlement leaders. "Pravin Lal is focused on family, of course, but also on his inner fears, and his desire to build and have people admire what he builds."

"Though strangely, he kept to the background," warbled a young woman. "He'll never be more than a figurehead, I think."

The lead analyst nodded. "Deirdre Skye...she didn't move around

much, at least until the Chairman got near her. And that misty thing that she represented with...”

Yang wanted to shout at them that Lady Deirdre was not what she appeared to be, but in fact had opened some kind of gateway to something so vast it could only be a psych effect existing in the world of Chiron itself. But that was not for them to know.

He began to pace, letting them babble on. He had touched her mind, and he knew now how dangerous she was. More dangerous than all of the other faction leaders put together, which he could not have guessed. And whatever strange psychic connection they had shared made it even more difficult to see her objectively.

I have to kill her, or she will destroy me.

An attendant entered. “Chairman Yang, General Markos wanted me to contact you. There’s some kind of discrepancy in the service records at Lady Skye’s apartments.”

“Good,” said Yang. “Let’s see what she’s up to.”

* * *

“Someone accessed their touchpanel at 2307 hours,” said General Markos, displaying records on a screen. The spymaster skulked in the background. “They ordered a random series of dishes from the guest menu, and the orders were dispatched to the kitchens. But a series of dishes had already been prepared for Deirdre Skye, ten minutes earlier.”

Yang stared at the screen. “Perhaps she’s hungry,” muttered the spymaster.

General Markos shook his head. “This order was placed inside the kitchen itself. And look at the order—mungo soup, silva noodles, and locuseeds.” He linked in to the guest menu. “They aren’t on the guest menu at all. So we cross-referenced the attendant who took her the food—family name Alleyne.”

“Alleyne.” Yang had an excellent memory, and he had heard that name before, during the last rebellion.

“She’s not an attendant at all,” said Markos. “She works on the drill lines. So what’s she doing in the kitchens? I’ve dispatched someone to bring her in.”

“Wait,” said Yang. “Let’s not tip our hands to the rebels. We’ll watch Lady Skye tonight, and see where she takes us.”

* * *

Deirdre stared at her tray, using her spoon to swirl the thick soup. Dark mushrooms surfaced in the current and vanished again, like creatures breasting on a murky sea.

“What are you looking at, Lady Skye?” asked Franklin. “If you don’t mind my asking, that is.” She shook herself out of her reverie and grunted at him.

The tiny red fruits. They had spelled *go*, or so it seemed. *Go*, as in leave?

She looked at the fruits, now jumbled by the motion of the attendant. She thought the woman looked odd, carrying the tray so delicately as she entered.

And with the guard staring at her back.

Another mushroom surfaced and then vanished again, and she thought of sinister things lurking beneath calm surfaces. She let go of the spoon, and it clattered into the bowl.

“I’m leaving,” she said, standing up and wrapping her robes about her.

“Where are you going?” asked Franklin.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. But I’m leaving now. You come with me.”

He hurried to her side, and they pushed the open stud on the door. A moment passed, a long moment for Deirdre, and then the door slid open.

Deirdre stepped out into the hallway. The hall was wide, and longer than she remembered. The guard stood impassively, his hands folded in front of him. He didn't acknowledge her or Franklin as they came through the door.

Deirdre turned and hurried down the hallway, wondering if the guard would stop them. But when she glanced back he hadn't even moved.

"This place gives me the creeps," said Franklin, hurrying to keep up. Deirdre nodded and picked up her pace as they turned a corner, heading for the elevators.

The man who came toward her in the hallway was dressed in simple citizen's clothes, his face unreadable. He carried another white tray, and on the tray was another bowl of soup and a green vase with a red rose.

"Jin," she said, on impulse.

"Go to the hallway ahead and take two lefts," the man whispered, and Deirdre couldn't even tell his lips were moving. "If you see someone, follow them."

Then he walked past them and was gone.

She walked on, trying to maintain her cool. Franklin's hands clenched and unclenched helplessly; he still had no weapon.

They took two lefts, and there was another citizen, carrying yet another tray with a white bowl. As soon as he saw them he turned through a doorway, and Lady Deirdre hurried through as the door swung shut, with Franklin biting back a cry as he dove after her. She found herself in a dark room, though she could make out the hulking shapes of furniture—several chairs and big cabinets.

"This way," hissed a voice. She felt someone grip her arm, and then they were hurrying through a series of rooms. They came to a long closet that smelled of fragrant wood, and suddenly a deeper darkness opened up, and they were running down twisting halls and

narrow stairs carved from rock.

They ran for a long time, and Deirdre felt the muscles in her young legs burning, until they finally stopped in a long, low-ceilinged room, breathless. The room contained several battered chairs and small glowlamps that lit the space unevenly. At a long table in the middle sat a man in simple clothes, and he quickly stood as they entered.

“Lady Deirdre Skye,” he said, walking toward them and extending his hand, though he spoke in low, urgent tones. “Welcome. I am Jin Long.” His face looked thick and puffy as he came from the shadows, but his eyes shone with passion. The hand that gripped hers was badly scarred, as if from a battle.

“Where are we?” asked Deirdre, as she sat at the table, looking around at their ragged surroundings.

“You’re in a secret room in the sub-basements of the Hive. Some sympathetic drones carved it out for us during a mining operation. Yang doesn’t know it’s here.”

“But shouldn’t I get back so he won’t know I’m gone?”

Jin Long shook his head and reached for a cup of tea on the table. His movements were precise and controlled. “You won’t be able to go back, Lady Skye. Yang knows that you sent a message to us.”

“How?”

“He was watching the kitchen staff. The young woman who brought you the first dish...” Jin shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“Will he come down here after us?”

“It’s true Yang doesn’t know this place. But he now has every loyal guard combing the lower levels to determine where you went. If he figures out I’m in this base...” He set the teacup down, and this time Deirdre could see the faintest shaking of his hands.

“So what is this rebellion of yours? What are you fighting against? Chairman Yang seems to think he has a communal utopia here.”

Jin Long smiled at that. "Chairman Yang runs a virtual police state filled with citizens who are dumb, or learn to play dumb, so they aren't killed or banished to the mines. His ideals of communal utopia have given way to one singular vision, which is his own immortality." He touched his right arm. "These scars you see are thanks to him."

"We saw one of his warriors, and they had some kind of device in their heads."

Jin nodded. "Neural grafting. Another tool to make sure Hive citizens do exactly what he wants, and nothing more."

Franklin spoke up from his position against the wall. "These are serious accusations, sir."

"You haven't seen the worst. I'll show you the mines, where the human flotsam of the Hive work side by side with political prisoners, psyche whips at their backs. I'll show you nerve stapling..."

Deirdre felt a chill as she heard the phrase, and she thought of the Morganite warrior with the ridges in her skin. "The Council will never stand for this."

Jin nodded. "Exactly. But there's almost nothing left of the current rebellion. We took over an entire base, but then Yang destroyed most of us. The rest have been in hiding ever since."

He took a compact video unit, sheathed in some kind of tarnished metal, and slid it across the table to her. "I brought you here because sooner or later Yang will destroy us, and I wanted you to see this first."

Deirdre tapped the play stud and watched images flicker on the small screen.

They were images of some kind of laboratory that opened from a dark cave. Red light carved up the darkness, and the camera panned across several figures, lying on rough metal beds. Tortured figures, staring at the ceiling, their mouths open and their backs arched. She

saw the flayed flesh, and the ridges of nerve staples along their bodies.

She finally touched the stop stud. "We saw them do this to a conquered Morganite soldier."

"Well, the technique was perfected here, and on citizens, not prisoners of war. Let me show you something else." He pulled out a thin metal folder and took out two sets of aged, crumbling paper.

Deirdre took them and examined them. "Crew manifests," she said. "From the original *Unity* mission. It looks like these are the people who occupied one landing pod."

"Yang's pod," said Jin. "Now look at the other."

"Another manifest, dated ten years later." She scanned it, then began to compare the two. "There are...About every third name here is missing."

"Dead," said Jin. "Or relabeled as a drone, and therefore no longer a citizen."

"Are you saying he killed all these people?" asked Franklin, coming from the shadows to look over Deirdre's shoulder.

Jin nodded. "Eight years after planetfall, when Yang took his loyal security forces and eliminated anyone who resisted his vision. He called it the Great Correction, and it wasn't the last."

Deirdre nodded. "He lied to me about the number of bases he had. He said he had three."

Jin perked up. "And you know how many bases there are?"

"Yes, I do. There are five. And we have soldiers positioned to attack each one if something happens to us."

"How did you get this information? Does Yang know you know this?"

"No," said Deirdre.

Suddenly, red lights triggered on every side, bathing the room in crimson. Jin was on his feet in an instant. "That means that a tunnel perimeter has been violated."

From somewhere above them came the rattle of gunfire and the high-pitched sounds of energy weapons. The red lights suddenly went out, plunging the room into blackness until dim yellow emergency lights flickered on. From a hallway ran three rebels in dark uniforms, weapons drawn.

Jin shouted at them. "What's happening, Ani?"

"Hiveguard have entered the tunnels from the closet entrance," said a young girl with a yellow armband. She fingered her weapon nervously. "There's a lot of them. Enough to end it."

Jin looked at Deirdre. "They followed you in. If you have a plan, now's the time to use it. Yang wiped most of us out several weeks ago."

"Let's just get out of here for now," said Deirdre. "I'll contact Pravin and tell him to surround the other Hive bases. That should ensure our safe passage back to the settlements, where we can sort this all out."

"Give me a weapon," said Franklin. One of the escorts handed him a small penetrator, and all of them ran, Jin in the lead. Deirdre found herself in another tunnel, this one damp and uneven and sloping deeper underground. Ahead they could hear the shrieking of mining equipment.

"Pravin, this is Deirdre," she said into her quicklink. He appeared, his face pinched with concern. "Deirdre, we can hear alarms in the hallway. What is happening?"

"Yang is attacking freedom fighters under the base, and I'm with them. But listen, I have evidence here that he's killed and tortured hundreds of people. We need to move against his bases."

Pravin frowned. "That's a drastic step. Are you sure he means to do us harm?"

“Yes!” she hissed, as something flashed in the tunnel behind her. “He’s planted devices in the heads of his soldiers, and enslaved citizens in the mines. He’s ruthless. Signal the troops.”

“All right. But Santiago will need to...” Suddenly there was a crash and shouts from behind him, and the sound of a door bursting inward. Pravin’s face swayed crazily as he ran without turning off his video link, crossing to the door and shutting it.

“I’ll get the troops in motion,” he said, and then vanished.

Deirdre ran across jagged, wet stone, and ahead she saw Jin and his three rebels vanishing into a weird yellow haze of light. She hurried to catch up, Franklin with her, and then she found herself banging across a metal platform with a great void yawning to each side.

She looked around as she ran, and caught glimpses of the miners, thin and bony and haggard, working in rags while uniformed guards flicked psyche whips across their backs. She saw ten of the drones pushed into a human pyramid, supporting a rotting structure of wood for no apparent reason, and she wondered how long they were supposed to stand there.

“Come on!” shouted Jin, almost on the other side of the metal bridge. There was the rattle of gunfire, and shots hit the bridge from below, ricocheting off into blackness. Deirdre looked down to see one of the guards below holding an auto-shredder pistol and unloading it toward them, and then Franklin opened fire in return, pelting the rocks beneath.

She ran, her legs flashing, using every ounce of the youth her body possessed. She reached the other side of the bridge, her chest heaving, and Jin pulled her forward into another tunnel.

“We’re just running now,” he said. “We’re going nowhere.” Deirdre caught a brief glimpse of fiery lights in a narrow tunnel, and bodies burning and tumbling down. “They’re going to get us this time.” Jin suddenly looked ten years older, his face slackening.

Deirdre stopped to catch her breath, her mind whirling. “Can we get to the virtual world?”

“What?”

“The virtual world, the thing with the goggles that Yang showed us after dinner. It was near the dining hall.”

Jin conferred with Ani. “We have an outside chance of making it, but they’ll find us there quickly.”

“Go,” said Deirdre. “Don’t ask why because I can’t explain.” She felt a broad shift inside her, as if the ground had rolled beneath her feet. The planetmind had already started to stir, anticipating her arrival.

“Let’s go,” said Jin. “We’re dead here anyway.”

They ran through tunnels and up stairs, through darkness, trying to put the gunfire and shouts behind them. Finally they emerged into a broad tunnel where a few citizens walked, some carrying loads on their backs.

The citizens parted for them, not even looking at their faces. Jin turned down another broad tunnel and nearly collided with two hiveguard. The guards brought their weapons up at lightning-fast speed, and Deirdre saw a flash. Franklin shouted in pain, and another of Jin’s men fell. Then the rebels opened fire, and Jin himself dove into one of the guards, jabbing the man in the throat and hurling him down on his skull.

“Franklin!” Deirdre shouted. She could see blood blooming on his inner thigh, and he grimaced.

“Okay, Lady. No worries. Not fatal.”

He stumbled on. The tunnels began to look familiar. They pushed through a door into the dining hall, which now felt very cool, and then into the dark lounge where the virtual world consoles waited.

“Does anyone know how these work?” asked Jin, studying a set of goggles. Franklin fell into a chair, his face covered with a sheen of sweat.

Deirdre sat down and took several deep breaths, calling forth the

prehypnotic state that now came so easily. She could feel her own excitement blending into the presence of the planetmind, and from that she felt as if the world itself was hungry, waiting for her.

She put on the goggles and pushed the “on” stud. The world rippled around her, and she experienced the first infinite touch of the planetmind.

“Crank this thing to eleven,” said Deirdre, and then she let the deirdrebody slip away.

* * *

She pushed through the virtual world with a reckless abandon and threw herself fully into the neural net of the planetmind, feeling the impact of her arrival ripple from one side of the world to the next.

She remembered the image of Chairman Yang and herself, the image that had shaken her on her last visit to the virtual world. She envisioned the two of them floating in space, and she twisted the image of their bodies into a jagged force that she brandished at the planetmind, and she focused her energy on saying, *This. This is your enemy.*

She felt the planetmind welcome the vision eagerly, and the small deirdrebody wondered if the planetmind had been waiting for this all along, waiting to experience Deirdre’s rage and learn it, and then magnify it to the size of the world.

She felt energy crack back and forth through Planet, from one side to the other, and the first panic crept in as she wondered if it were out of her control.

But of course it’s out of my control. It always was.

Trying to ignore the growing turbulence of the planetmind’s thought storm, she sailed over the surface of the world, shifting back and forth across the deep blue-green sea until she found the five bases of the Human Hive. She fought to pull the mindworm sparks from nearby xenofields and to focus the gathering storm on these five tiny holes, and all the while she could feel the rage of the

planetmind growing, magnifying itself again and again.

She felt her own deirdrebody thrashing, and she felt the storm rising, and she felt the planetmind's hatred feeding back and forth from her into it. It was pulling her rage from her, bringing forth her long-buried hatreds—hatred of Morgan with his cool arrogance, hatred of Spartan troops burning her hybrids to ash, hatred of Lal and his weakness, and Yang's manipulations, and her own citizens who had forsaken her. And she felt the whistling, powerful storm of the planetmind ready to sweep it all away.

I could end it here, she suddenly realized. I could guide this force from heaven and bury every bit of humanity beneath the crimson tangles of xenofields and mindworm boils the size of mountains. There would be nothing left.

Her body twisted, and her back arched with the power moving through her. The rage of the planetmind continued to roar, pushing the part of her that was Deirdre into a smaller and smaller place, as the planetmind flayed her layers of consciousness away, stripping her mind, destroying her identity.

Then even that thought was stripped from her, and all that was left was something at the core of her being, the small human child who had once cowered against the storms of Earth.

That child huddled against the titanic rage of the planetmind, and knew with absolute clarity that she, Deirdre, would not survive this storm with anything resembling a human consciousness. If the deirdrebody lived through this, it would emerge as a tiny synapse in a vast field of alien consciousness, utterly consumed. All of Planet's beauty would lie again under the impassive suns.

The end of humanity.

The storm pushed into her. She focused for a moment on the planet wound that she knew was the Hive, and a demon boil of mindworms tore from the xenofields and covered the central skylights, until the skylights burst and she felt an almost orgasmic relief as the worms flooded in to close this wound.

It would be the first of many wounds closed. The storm gathered and buffeted against its barriers, and she felt the planetmind's urgent questions of *how*, of *show us the way*, *humanthing*, and her consciousness shrank until she was only this question, and nothing more.

* * *

Jin, his escorts, and Franklin watched in horror as Deirdre thrashed and twisted in her chair, garbled sounds coming from her mouth, the sounds turning gradually into something like a small child's cries.

"Is she all right?" asked Ani, moving back a step.

"Leave her alone," said Franklin, breathing heavily and trying to stanch the blood that gushed now from his thigh. "It's what she wanted."

"What's she doing?" asked Jin, glaring at him.

"I'm not sure, but she went into the planetmind, over and over, back at the abandoned base. Maybe she's there now."

The figures appeared from the darkness in complete silence, and with deadly force. Jin's escorts fell from shots to the throat, and another shot ended Franklin's life, leaving him slumped in the chair. Jin leaped back into the shadows, then froze at the sound of a cold voice.

"Don't kill Jin or Skye," it said. From the shadows stepped Chairman Yang, his face cool, a half-dozen hiveguard surrounding him. Deirdre continued to thrash on the chair, more cries escaping her lips. Jin kept his eyes on Yang, not even looking as Ani turned toward him, death shadowing her face.

"Surrender, Jin, and you won't be killed," said Yang.

"But I would endure far worse than death if you captured me," said Jin, shaking his head. "No, you'll have to kill me."

"You don't have that choice now," said Yang, and took a step

forward, his escorts moving with him. “I control the very air you breathe, the very ground beneath your feet.”

Jin jerked his arm with lightning quickness, and something exploded, sending pressurized white gases hissing into the air. In a split second Yang and his guard had on pressure masks.

“Get him!” shouted Yang. “He wants to breathe the gases. He wants to die!”

A strange conflict ensued, with the dark figures of the guards and Yang rushing into the white mists, and Jin avoiding them, beating them off, trying to inhale the gases and end his life. As they struggled his motions became weaker, until finally Yang grabbed him and threw him on the ground, tearing a mask from one of his own people to put on Jin’s face.

“You won’t escape that easily,” said Yang, bending over him. “We have too much to discuss.”

More of the hiveguard came in and pinned Jin, two on each limb, while someone bound his arms. Then Yang turned to Deirdre, who still twisted in the chair, her face focused in distant ecstasy.

From the central shaft, the light began to dim, taking on an eerie quality.

“Mindworms!” shouted one of the guards, monitoring an incoming message. “Gathering on the central skylight!”

“They won’t break through it,” said Yang.

“Still coming,” said the guard. “The skylight is beginning to crack. And more worms are coming from every field, Chairman! Boils so tall they blot the sun!”

“Calm yourself,” spat Yang, his eyes flickering like onyx. He looked at Deirdre, at her thin, hard body, with a sudden realization. “It’s her,” he said. He went to her and tore off the goggles, but she continued to roll in the chair, making strange keening sounds.

“Mindworms still coming, Chairman,” said a guard faintly.

Yang hurried to a chair and put on the goggles. He looked at the hiveguard around him, knowing that he was about to leave himself helpless, to chase Deirdre into the virtual world. "Don't bring me from the trance, whatever happens," he said. He took one look around, at the curved ceiling and the narrow dark tunnels of the world he had built. From somewhere nearby a glass panel burst, and screams began echoing through the corridors.

He put on the goggles and hit the activate switch.

Chapter Twelve

He found her easily, her presence huddled in a tiny corner of the virtual world, but when he touched her he found himself catapulted into a horrific storm, a storm of thought so immense and violent that it took every ounce of his self-control to keep his bearings.

He retreated, screening out the chaos and searching for something recognizable, something human that would be Deirdre Skye. And then he found it, the tiny pinprick of humanity in the storm-tossed mind of the world.

“Deirdre Skye.” He sent his thoughts at her.

“Yang. Why are you here?” Her thought-voice sounded strange to him, distant and soft, like the presence of a little girl. He was inexplicably reminded of Mia, when she had been tiny, her face round and soft.

He pushed closer to the Deirdre presence, and she did not pull away. She seemed to float in a kind of eye of the hurricane around them. “You’re destroying my world, Deirdre. I can’t let you do that.”

“Can’t stop it.” Three clear syllables. He felt something like a tiny hand push into his mind and poke at it with wonder.

He pushed at her angrily, trying to form his thoughts into blades, or torrents of acid, or something else that could cut, bind, or destroy this Deirdre pattern. “I will kill you.” His rage caused ripples of scarlet in the storm around him, and its howling increased. But the tiny Deirdre presence just slipped away.

“Why should you...destroy me?” asked the Deirdre voice. “What point to that? To live forever?”

To live forever. He felt a tremor of fear. She had seen his essence.

* * *

The Deirdre child felt the fear in the Yang presence, and something opened to her, the deep yearning for eternal life at his core. He was not so different from Planet, in that way, or from the timeless child she now was.

A tide of feeling washed through the planetmind, and Deirdre felt the experiences of her life rush in again, transforming the child presence back into the mature, hardened woman she had become over decades and decades of life. The humiliations, the betrayals, the ruthless struggle of life had hardened her into something like a diamond, but they also had separated her from the people around her.

And now there was the Yang presence, equally hardened, their swords crossed in a struggle for their very lives.

The storm raged around her, and she reached out for him, ready to destroy him and everything else human in the world. She touched him again, and felt his burning desire for eternal life...

And at the core of that, his fear again.

The fear that he would die, that he was worthless, that the world despised him. That his own passions would doom him to an ignoble death, insignificant against the sweep of history.

She held back for one moment, and the tide of her life rushed back out with the planetmind, pulling through her like an ocean, washing the layers of her life away once again.

And this time Yang went with her.

* * *

She felt the cold sea on her feet, and she smelled a salty wind; the nature she loved. She felt the burning in her muscles, feet pounding stone, and she heard the sea. She felt a rough touch on her hand, and warm waters. She saw the glint of sunlight on glass and two suns in a clear sky.

She saw dark hallways and clean tunnels. She saw sunlight filtering down, made more precious by its scarcity. She saw citizens, their strong hands turned to good work. She saw victory and she saw defeat, and she relished the victory.

Time rushed backward, and she felt the pleasure of love, and the pain of first love, and the terror of spinning through black space. She tasted food after long hunger, and cool water after a long thirst.

She felt the exhilaration of defeating six men in combat, and the perfect silence of long meditation. She saw the calm face of a wife, and that wife's stony face in death. She felt Daughter, and never had anything so soft pierced her heart so completely.

There was warmth on her skin, and snow beneath feet There was the smell of pine, and the stars above, blanketing the endless Earth. That was Deirdre.

There were the beautiful red roofs of the temple, and the smile of a mother, and the sun receding for another day, wrapping the world in darkness.

That was Yang, and their long, rich lives merged for a moment into one.

For one moment they reverberated in the vastness of the planetmind, their raw humanity suddenly overwhelming the grasping, angry storm of Planet, and that moment lasted a lifetime.

Then Deirdre released it, and fell back into her body, taking her humanity, and her hatred and anger, with her. She left the planetmind behind to blow out its rage against itself.

* * *

The first thing she felt was a hot tear against her cheek, and a terrible lethargy washing through her. She lay at an odd angle in a dark room.

She looked around. She had tumbled from her chair, and the virtual world goggles lay an arm's length away. There were people in the room, chattering anxiously. Finally she sat up.

On the floor, bound with more shackles than she thought could fit on a human being, was Chairman Yang, his eyes burning with pure rage. Jin Long stood over him, three of the guards around him, the others dead on the floor. He looked over at Deirdre as she stirred.

Jin walked over and helped her to her feet, his movements brusque and strong. She became aware of the sounds of screams outside, and the screeching hiss of the mindworms.

“Somehow this is your doing,” Jin said to her, pointing at Yang. Then he motioned toward the hallways. “Can you stop these mindworms? They’re killing my people.”

She stared at Jin. She could feel his urgency and anger peppering her, but her mind still carried the echoes of what she had experienced: the vastness of the planetmind, and the deepest intimacy she had ever known.

She stared at Yang, bound on the floor, and a wave of pity and sadness swept through her. His eyes met hers, and for a moment she saw his vulnerability, the sheer breathtaking scope of what he had just lost. Then he looked away, and she was alone again.

“Lady Skye?” said Jin, grabbing at her arm. “The mindworms are destroying us...”

She looked at Jin again. In fact, she could already hear the rage of the mindworms fading, as the planetmind lost its focus and settled back into its purposeless rhythms. But he didn’t know that.

She pointed at Yang. “He belongs to the settlements.”

Jin shook his head. “No. He’s my prisoner, and he’ll face his punishment here.”

“I know what you’ll do to him, Jin, so let me give you a choice. You can turn Chairman Yang over to the settlements, and join us, opening these bases to the world. Or I can let the mindworms bury us all.” She set her jaw and waited for an answer.

He stared at her as if he would call her bluff, but she held his gaze. Finally he looked down at Ani and his other rebels, their bodies

scattered on the floor, and nodded. “All right. I’ll do it.”

She closed her eyes and reached out to the planetmind. She could hear the mindworm cries collapsing into disorder, and knew they would soon melt away or return to the xenofields. But as she tried to rejoin the planetmind she felt resistance, and her brows knit.

“Something wrong?”

She shook her head. “It’s just going to take some time. Have your people lock themselves in their rooms, and wait for the mindworms to dissipate. No more will come.”

Jin Long turned and began snapping orders. Lady Deirdre thought of the mindworms, and the destruction they were probably now wreaking on the human world, even as the storm of the planetmind abated without her.

And she thought of the planetmind’s vastness, so different from her own mind, and realized that she would probably never feel it again.

One month later

Deirdre sat in *Gaia One*, looking out a diamond-shaped window as the surface of Chiron whizzed by. She wore a form-fitting dress around her youthful new body, and tried to remember, every day, just how good that body felt. She remembered not out of ego, or so she hoped, but rather to remind herself of the generations of new people, each one full of promise, who rose up on Planet as her own life headed into its unnaturally long twilight.

She saw a xenofield off to the side of *Gaia One*, and watched as its crimson tubules became a blur from the speed of her vehicle. Then they had passed the fields, and she could see only bare red ground again, and it left her with a hollow feeling.

She had tried to return to the planetmind several times since arriving back in the settlements, but each time it rejected her utterly, pushing her forcibly back into the tiny human presence that

was Deirdre. It had trusted her, she guessed, to destroy the human contagion, and she had betrayed it. So now she was alone.

Funny. Of all the lessons Planet took away from me, it looks as if pettiness will be the most lasting.

That thought made her smile, as *Gaia One* arrived at Pravin's UNHQ.

* * *

Pravin greeted her, shaking her hand energetically. It was hard work knitting the settlements back together after the waves of mindworm attacks, but the new Pravin seemed to relish the challenge.

They had tea, and then he took her deep beneath the ground, to a secure facility, and motioned her to a plastic bench in front of a translucent high-security static shield. He left her there, alone.

On the other side of the shield a metal door opened, and a stooped figure walked through, his hands bound in front of him. She was startled to see the toll that such a short amount of time had taken on this proud man, and it saddened her.

Sheng-ji Yang walked to a bench on the other side of the shield and slowly sat down. Two guards with penetrators drawn entered after him and stood along the wall.

"Deirdre Skye," he said after a long moment. "Should I call you Lady?" Deep creases had formed in the skin on his face, but his eyes still glinted as he looked around the small room.

"Just Deirdre, Sheng-ji." She lifted her hand, but the static shield hummed between them. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected."

"I hear your daughter, Mia, is doing very well. She has taken a position as one of Jin's advisors. She certainly has the respect of the settlements." She looked at him, feeling the words trail off. There was nothing really to say, when they had already shared everything

in the planetmind.

Yang nodded. "Thank you. I hope to see her someday, in the future." He looked at her through the shield, his gaze level. "They're withholding the genetic treatments from me."

"You're a prisoner. They have to do that."

He smiled. "I would have done the same to any of you." For a moment he seemed young again, tough and full of cunning. "Jin Long is not everything he seems, you know. My body may die in here, but the world I created, and the mind that created it, will endure."

Deirdre felt a sudden chill ripple down her spine. Then Yang's face slackened, and he was an old man again. He stood up slowly.

"Good-bye, Chairman," she said.

"Good-bye, Lady."

He crossed to the door, and the guards followed him out.

* * *

Jin Long left the meeting room, where his ten advisors sat in their glittering robes of state and told him how the Hive must be rebuilt after the mindworm attacks. They asked if he had wanted to shut down one or two of the bases and begin building a new complex aboveground, but he had refused. He liked it down here, really.

Ani and Doc certainly would have been shocked, but they were no longer with him. They had been killed by Chairman Yang himself.

Chairman Yang. The name had a ring to it, and the respect of the citizens. Perhaps it was fitting that the title, and even the name, be passed down with the rule of the Hive. Perhaps.

He walked down a short hall and into a bare room with a single chair. He lay back in the chair and put on the goggles, and activated the virtual world. Once inside he used a code sequence to open a very secure data series, so secure that not even his ten

advisors knew of it.

But Jin knew of it, because he had found the code sequence in a small datachip in one of Yang's ninety-nine sleeping chambers. Almost as if it were left for him.

Worlds opened around him, worlds that had been constructed by the Chairman, worlds that revealed his spirit. Worlds of fatigue and pain, and cunning and victory and a hundred more. Jin Long immersed himself in these worlds, and recreated them, as he had every night since the settlement leaders had left.

He kept it up until he didn't know where his own mind ended and these new worlds began, and then he headed for sleep, wondering if Mia would join him.

* * *

My father left me two documents, in a sealed red box, that were not to be opened until his death. Since the settlement leaders have taken him prisoner, and since they are withholding his genetic treatments, I have received the box from a mid-level bureaucrat.

I don't know if Jin Long would have given me this box, had he known of it. I don't know if the contents will help or hinder me in the new Hive government. I have to consider things carefully, as my father taught me, and plan my next move just as carefully.

The box contains the genetic records of Jin Long and those of my father. These records are identical.

I knew my father had performed certain experiments in cloning, hoping to develop the perfect warrior, and the perfect servant, and copy them ad infinitum. But it's typical of him to have first used the technology to extend his own line. In addition, Jin Long has spent increasing amounts of time immersed in the virtual world, where my father's personal psych profiles are stored.

My father was a wise man. He knew, I believe, that he would become rigid, unable to adapt to the ever-changing world as he got older. He just wanted to ensure that if he were overthrown, it would be by his own

hand, so to speak. There could be no surer path to immortality than this.

I don't know why my father didn't entrust this knowledge to me. I suppose he simply felt that I wouldn't be a pure enough expression of his essence. He thought me tainted, by my mother.

But he gave me his will, and his strength of spirit. I don't have to sit by and watch Jin Long rule in my father's stead. I have my own desires.

I am my father's daughter. I must be very careful.

—from the Journals of Yang Mia

Epilogue

Prokhor Zakharov sat under the flickering lights of five different touchscreens, drumming his fingers. His eyes had taken on a faraway look, and the swarm of technicians, scientists, and hangers-on had dispersed, recognizing that he was deep in thought.

Very deep.

He was turning his formidable powers of observation inward, which he did only in times of extreme crisis, and recent events certainly qualified. This Human Hive disturbed him—an entire population, raised with unfamiliar customs under the iron rule of a man he had believed long dead, the man's life extended by technology no doubt stolen from his own labs.

, Zakharov shook his head and looked at the flickering screens. He believed in the free flow of information among his staff, which no doubt facilitated these security breaches. And he had deliberately designed the gene treatments to require certain necessary, and expensive, elements, so that the other settlement leaders would have to come begging to him each time they needed more doses. If Yang had found a way to circumvent that process...

He stood up and stretched his tired back. There were no windows in this sparse room, and he didn't usually need them, but sometimes it was nice to focus on a far horizon. So he took a small elevator to the observatory at the top of his metal demesnes.

Through small windows he looked out across the rolling landscapes, bathed under stars and moonlight. He looked out through the haze of his own thoughts. This new Hive leader, what did he want? And the battles over the Gaian territories had been quite vicious. Zakharov had powerful technology, and strong alliances, but would that be enough to protect him?

His haze of thought was interrupted by a sharp dose of reality.

Sensors triggered alerts in his base even as he saw a flicker of light on the horizon. He picked up a pair of binocs and put them to his eyes. He set the zoom level at maximum, focusing on that winking light on Chiron's long horizon.

Through the binocs he saw a horde of people, their backs bent beneath heavy loads, their clothes and armor tattered. But there were thousands of them, and some of them were tall and rangy and carried vicious-looking weapons. And there were also tanks, creaky-looking but huge, armored in thick, heavy plates. The mass of people and equipment rolled forward, toward him.

Among the masses he saw a few individuals, their clothes even more tattered than the rest, carrying metal crosses on their backs. Giant metal crosses, each one larger than the person who carried it.

Carried for no purpose that he could see.

To be continued in *Book III: Twilight of the Mind*

About the Author

Michael Ely has lived all around the world and worked as a multimedia designer, a computer game producer/designer, a filmmaker, and an author. You can drop him a line at bookthoughts@yahoo.com.